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ABSTRACT

A project evaluated the overall effectiveness of the Advanced Courses Development Programme (ACDP) of the Scottish Vocational Education Council. A peer review of selected Higher National (HN) unit specifications involved 195 subject experts who completed evaluation questionnaires on specifications in their specialist areas. The main body of the research consisted of a series of case studies of the development of HN units and courses in colleges throughout Scotland. Development work for the new courses took these basic forms: national development of HN unit specifications and course frameworks, local development undertaken by a college, consortium development undertaken by two or more colleges, and joint development between college and industry. Evidence was insufficient to suggest a national or a local approach was markedly better than the other. Informational support was not sufficient in itself; staff most valued support in actually carrying out their tasks. Data suggested strongly that staff saw external validation of courses as legitimate and valuable. Five components of the system were examined regarding their role in an effective program: competence, HN unit specifications, assessment, merit, and quality assurance. Findings also indicated that most staff saw as successful the facility for articulation that was intended as a central feature of the ACDP and many teachers felt they were changing their style because of introduction of new HN units and courses. The conclusion was that the fundamental model was sound. (YLB)

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Units and Competences:

A Case Study of SCOTVEC's Advanced Courses Development Programme

Harry Black
John Hall
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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
List of tables	v
1 Introduction	1
The background: government policy	1
The background: SCOTVEC developments	1
The background to the research project	5
Research methods	6
Outline structure of the report	8
2 Processes of implementation	9
2.1 Development processes and issues	9
The process of development	9
The questions to be addressed	9
Examples of development	9
2.1.1 Articulation as the motive	10
Summary	11
2.1.2 Adopting national unit specifications	11
Summary	12
2.1.3 College collaboration	13
Summary	15
2.1.4 Joint development between college and industry	15
Summary	17
2.1.5 The case studies in perspective	17
2.2 Local and national developments	17
Insights from the college and subject questionnaires	18
Insights from the interviews	18
Discussion	21
2.3 Support	22
The support wanted by staff	23
Where did staff see support coming from?	24
Summary	25
2.4 Validation	27
Summary	29
3 Component parts of the system	30
3.1 Competence	30
What is competence?	30
Problems of definition	30
What is the place of knowledge?	31
Discussion	32

3.2 Higher national unit specifications	33
Clarity of the specifications	33
The results from the interviews	34
Insights from the subject questionnaire	36
Discussion	38
3.3 Assessment	39
Insights from the college questionnaires	39
Insights from the interviews	41
Discussion	43
3.4 Merit	45
Insights from college and subject questionnaires	45
Insights from the interviews	48
Discussion	49
3.5 Quality assurance	50
Internal quality assurance	51
National quality assurance: external course assessors	51
Discussion	56
4 The system in practice: articulation and teaching	57
4.1 Articulation	57
Insights from the college questionnaires	57
Insights from the interviews	58
Discussion	60
4.2 Teaching	60
Insights from the college questionnaire	60
Insights from the interviews	61
The meaning of student-centred learning	61
Attitudes to change	62
Obstacles to change	63
Discussion	64
5 Conclusions	65
Scope of the research	65
The development of unit specifications and course frameworks	66
The components of units and courses	68
Unit specifications	68
Articulation	69
Comparisons with other courses	70
In conclusion	71
References	74

Tables

1.1	Progress of the Advanced Courses Development Programme 1987-1990	3
1.2	Nationally developed HN Unit specifications	4
1.3	Number of validated advanced courses	4
1.4	Composition of Batch 1 and Batch 2 courses	5
1.5	Sources of data in the ACDP study	7
1.6	Types of case-study course	8
1.7	Composition of case-study courses	8
2.1	Pros and cons of local versus national developments	21
2.2	Advice and guidance in the implementation of new courses	22
3.1	Subject specialists completing evaluation questionnaires	34
3.2	Clarity of aspects of the unit specification	36
3.3	Rank order of specifications	37
3.4	Pre-defined and discretionary elements of a unit	38
3.5	Types of assessment used in HN Units	40
3.6	Change in use of diagnostic assessment	40
3.7	Use of continuous assessment	40
3.8	Change in aspects of higher education since the introduction of HN Units (assessment)	41
3.9	Bases used to distinguish between a pass and a merit	46
3.10	Staff agreeing with the awarding of merit for either individual units or overall course awards	47
3.11	Ease of determining merit	47
3.12	Ease of distinguishing merit from pass	47
3.13	Satisfaction with external course assessment	52
3.14	The duties of SCOTVEC external course assessors	54
4.1	National Certificate as preparation for entry to the new HNC/D courses	57
4.2	HNC/D courses as preparation for progression on to degree-level courses	58
4.3	Change in teaching methods	60
4.4	Aspects of higher education since the introduction of HN Units (teaching and learning)	61

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1 Introduction

❧ The background: government policy

The inception and implementation of SCOTVEC's *Advanced Courses Development Programme* must be seen in the light of the history of government policy relating to vocational education and training. As long ago as 1981, with the publication of the *New Training Initiative* (MSC, 1981), it was clear that there was to be a new emphasis given to this area. *Competence and Competition*, (MSC, 1984) and the ensuing White Paper 'Education and Training for Young People' (1985) emphasised the role that education and training would play in enhancing national competitiveness and led to the *Review of Vocational Qualifications*. This resulted, in England and Wales, in the establishment of a new *National Council for Vocational Qualifications* (NCVQ). In the White Paper of 1986 'Working Together - Education and Training' it was envisaged that NCVQ would work closely with industry interests 'to establish a clear focus for national action'. The Manpower Services Commission has since been replaced by the Training Agency and, more recently, by the Training, Enterprise and Education Directorate of the Employment Department (TEED). These bodies have been engaged on a programme of defining standards of performance for all employment sectors, in conjunction with a network of industry *Lead Bodies* set up following the White Paper 'Employment in the 1990s'. Each of these Lead Bodies acts as a focus, and has responsibility, for defining standards in its particular sector. The guiding principle behind vocational training has thus become the meeting of industry-defined standards of performance.

❧ The background: SCOTVEC developments

In Scotland, radical changes to the whole field of further education and training were brought about following the publication by the Scottish Education Department (as it then was) of *16-18s in Scotland - An Action Plan* (SED, 1983) which proposed a new, modularised, system of non-advanced further education provision. It very soon became apparent that this innovation had applications outwith the 16-18 age range and the *Action Plan*, as it became known, was soon having an impact across a wide range of provision. The immediate result was, in 1984, the creation of the *National Certificate*, which embodied the principles of the Action plan in a modularised system of non-advanced qualifications.

Whilst the Action Plan and the National Certificate had been devised, and initially implemented, by the SED, responsibility for them was

transferred in 1985 to the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC), a new body formed from the previous SCOTEC and SCOTBEC. Because these reforms had already occurred in Scotland, the Review of Vocational Qualifications, and the subsequently formed National Council for Vocational Qualifications did not have their remit extended north of the border, and SCOTVEC was given responsibility for accrediting Lead Body defined standards in Scotland.

Along with the National Certificate, SCOTVEC also inherited from SCOTEC and SCOTBEC their existing advanced courses provision in the form of Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma courses and examinations. Unfortunately, SCOTEC and SCOTBEC had each structured and organised these advanced courses in slightly different ways and their traditional examination-based systems did not articulate well with the college-based assessment systems and flexible provision being promoted by the National Certificate.

Accordingly, in 1987 SCOTVEC published *A Consultative Paper on SCOTVEC Higher Education Provision* which proposed several models of what re-structured advanced courses provision might look like if it was to articulate with the National Certificate and be in line with government policy. The period of consultation resulted in the publication of the *Advanced Courses Development Programme - A Policy Paper* (SCOTVEC, 1988) which proposed the retention of the group award titles of HNC and HND but moving to a unitised structure built around identified vocational competences. It proposed that a system capable of meeting present and future challenges would be one which:

- is flexible in terms of possible points of entry;
- is capable of giving formal recognition for performance achieved;
- is flexible in terms of modes of study;
- can accommodate quickly to changing national needs;
- articulates well with other higher education provision;
- leads to efficient use of available resources.

(Advanced Courses Development Programme: A Policy Paper, SCOTVEC, March 1988, para. 1.1)

In addition it was proposed that formal certification would not only be available for complete courses which qualified as group awards, but also for individual units taken separately. There was also to be

a significant devolution to the teaching institutions of responsibility for the specification of content, the planning of courses, and the assessment of student performance, subject to the development of acceptable mechanisms for the maintenance of nationally recognised standards.

(Advanced Courses Development Programme: A Policy Paper, SCOTVEC, March 1988, para. 1.2)

From the outset it was recognised by SCOTVEC that the development of the new Higher National courses and units could be undertaken either at a national level by SCOTVEC, or at a local level by a college, or a group of

colleges in collaboration, and a mixture of these types of development was foreseen. Initially colleges were invited to take part in the development of pilot courses, the first group of which was validated in 1988 and began to be delivered in August and September of that year. These early pilot courses, in Phase 1 of the scheme, did not always represent full implementations of the new system but were, rather, experiments in particular aspects of it. It was the case, for example, that courses were validated which were not competence-based but did address the issue of articulation with other qualifications. Experience was gained rapidly and the Phase 2 pilots, delivery of which began in August and September 1989, were much fuller implementations of the system. At the same time SCOTVEC was progressing with the development of nationally devised HN unit specifications and course frameworks. Following consultation with the colleges, and as a result of their wish to move quickly to full implementation, it was decided that it was not necessary to proceed to a Phase 3 of pilot courses and that a phased transition to the new system should begin in 1990, with the changeover to the new courses to be fully achieved by the beginning of academic session 1992/93. The lessons learned from the pilot courses were incorporated in the revised *Advanced Courses Development Programme Policy Paper - January 1990* (SCOTVEC, 1990). The first of the 'Batch 1' courses, as they were called to distinguish them from the pilot courses, were accordingly coming on stream in August and September 1990. A summary of the development so far is given below.

Table 1.1 *Progress of the Advanced Courses Development Programme 1987-1990*

1987	
Feb	Publication of Consultative Paper
May/June	Responses analysed; Recommendations drafted
June	Recommendations approved by SCOTVEC Board
	Interested parties informed by SCOTVEC
December	Colleges invited to participate in Phase 1 of Pilot Programme
1988	
March	Policy Paper published
May/June	Validation of first pilots
Aug/Sept	Start of Phase 1 Pilots
Sept	Colleges invited to participate in Phase 2 Pilot Programme
1989	
April/ June	Validation of Phase 2 Pilot courses / units
June	After consultation, issue of statement on future direction of ACDP, and timetable for transition to the new system
Aug	116 Nationally Developed HN unit specifications dispatched to centres
Aug/Sept	Start of Phase 2 Pilots
1990	
Jan	Policy Paper - Jan 1990 published
April / June	Validation of Batch 1 courses
July/Aug	86 Nationally Developed HN unit specifications dispatched to centres
Aug/Sept	Start of Batch 1 courses

Information supplied by SCOTVEC

The pilot courses were all developed by the colleges themselves, either individually or in collaboration. SCOTVEC provided support in the form of guidance notes, advice from officers, meetings and discussion groups. The subject areas which were selected to be the focus of national developments for use in the implementation stage were all areas in which it was expected that there would be a large student demand and that a reasonable number of colleges would wish to deliver the courses. The subject areas chosen for national development are shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Nationally developed HN Unit specifications

Session	Discipline	
1988/89	Accounting Computing Hospitality Management Electrical and Electronic Engineering Management	116 HN unit specifications issued to centres in August 1989
1989/90	Office Administration and Information and Office Management Engineering Additional HN units in: - Electrical and Electronic Engineering - Computing - Management	86 HN unit specifications issued to centres in July / August 1990

Information supplied by SCOTVEC

Where uptake did not justify national development then the responsibility for the transfer of courses into the new system was devolved to the colleges. Some basic statistics about the scope of the development up to the time of writing are shown in Tables 1.3 and 1.4. These show the numbers of courses validated at each stage of the ACDP and whether these courses consisted of nationally devised units or included some locally devised units. At the time that the research was conducted Batch 2 courses were not yet being delivered in the colleges, Batch 1 courses were between three and six months into delivery, Phase 2 pilot HNDs were into their second year, Phase 2 pilot HNCs (full time) were completed, and 43 phase 1 pilots had been completed.

Table 1.3 Number of validated advanced courses

	HNC	HND	HN Units and Post- Graduate	Total
Pilots Phase 1	9	18	16	43
Pilots Phase 2	59	91	8	158
Batch 1	143	85	21	249
Batch 2	329	115	19	463
Totals	540	309	64	913

Information supplied by SCOTVEC

Table 1.4 Composition of Batch 1 and Batch 2 courses

	Batch 1	Batch 2
Transferred courses – nationally developed	43%	37%
Transferred courses - centre/consortium developed	39%	32%
Innovative courses	18%	31%

Information supplied by SCOTVEC

The move towards devolution of responsibility to the colleges was in parallel with the recommendations of the Lindop Committee for higher education and has received further impetus from SCOTVEC's subsequent policy paper on *Quality Assurance* and their *Quality Development Programme* which sets out to increase colleges' involvement in, and responsibility for, their own quality assurance, subject to quality audit of internal systems in centres.

Other developments have been taking place concurrently, or in conjunction with the ACDP. Included amongst these must be numbered the establishment of Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Local Enterprise Companies; Employment Training; the expansion of the Scottish Wider Access Programme; the institution of Scottish Vocational Qualifications; and legislation affecting the management of colleges in the further and higher education sector. The emergent ACDP must therefore be seen in the light of the continuing thrust of government policy.

The background to the research project

In 1990 the Scottish Office Education Department asked the Scottish Council for Research in Education to conduct an *Evaluation of the Advanced Courses Development Programme in Further and Higher Education*, with the aim of forming a judgment on its overall effectiveness. This main aim naturally divides into two components, the first of which is concerned with the *processes* of developing Higher National Units (HN Units) and the courses which make use of them, while the second investigates the *products* of those developments, the units and courses themselves. These component areas of interest were expressed in terms of the following research questions which we set out to address:

- 1.1 What are the characteristics of local and national mechanisms for developing HN Units? What criteria are seen as appropriate in deciding which approach to follow?
- 1.2 What are the implications of national and local developments in terms of 'ownership' of the development, costs, ease of use, and overall effectiveness?
- 1.3 What are the perceived impacts of these different mechanisms on staff, students and SCOTVEC?

- 1.4 What criteria might therefore be used to describe 'good practice' in the development of HN Units?
- 2.1 What criteria might be appropriate for evaluating 'good practice' in respect of the specifications of HN Units, their articulation with other qualifications and their use in credit transfer arrangements?
- 2.2 What do staff perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of existing HN Unit specifications?
- 2.3 What similarities and differences do staff feel there to be in the treatment of general competences and approach to teaching between HN Units, National Certificate modules and undergraduate degrees?
- 2.4 What overlap do staff perceive as existing between National Certificate modules, HN Units and undergraduate degrees?

In addition, the answers to the questions outlined above would allow us to address two further issues of importance to the system of provision of further and higher education:

- 2.5 How might linkages between qualifications be best improved?
- 2.6 How might the Advanced Courses Development Programme best lead to rational and efficient provision across the further and higher education sector, avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort?

It is worth noting at this point that some of these research questions proved easier to address than others. Early discussions with our Advisory Committee suggested that, although students' views were very important, the resources we had available were inadequate to deal with them in any systematic way. Cost issues in relation to overall effectiveness also proved difficult to deal with. Accordingly, some of these questions are dealt with more fully than others and we will return to this in our concluding chapter.



Research methods

The work of gathering the research data for the evaluation took several forms. In the initial stage of the project we were concerned with establishing the criteria by which the ACDP might be judged and, in order to achieve this, we spent some time consulting with members of HM Inspectorate, SCOTVEC National Development Officers and others in SCOTVEC who had been directly concerned with the ACDP.

Thereafter two separate, but concurrent, exercises were conducted. The first of these comprised a peer review of selected HN Unit

specifications. A sample of subject experts from throughout Scotland was asked to complete evaluation questionnaires on specifications in their specialist areas. The specifications were chosen, with the aid of the project advisory committee, to reflect a range of subject areas. The HN Unit specifications chosen were: nationally devised specifications in Management, Accounting, Computing, Communication, and Engineering; and locally devised specifications in Communication and Engineering. The subject experts were asked to comment on these specifications in the light of the criteria we had established in our initial discussions. In all 195 subject experts took part in this exercise. In the text we refer to this study as the 'subject questionnaire'.

The main body of the research consisted of a series of case studies of the development of HN Units and courses in colleges throughout Scotland. In each of the chosen colleges a selection of courses was chosen and the course leaders for those courses were interviewed. A small number of additional interviews were also conducted with college senior managers who had had a particular responsibility for the implementation of the ACDP. Further insights were gained by asking staff who taught on these courses to complete a questionnaire. These teaching staff were not, however, interviewed. Four colleges were chosen in which to conduct the main case studies. Two of these were further education colleges, and two were central institutions. A further two colleges, both central institutions, were approached in respect of specific courses which we had identified as particularly interesting examples of certain types of development. In the text, the staff survey is referred to as the 'college questionnaire' and data from our interviews is referred to as 'insights from the interviews'.

In so far as was possible we attempted to cover similar subject areas in each college to allow for some measure of comparison. We were successful in looking at Engineering, Accounting, Computing and Management courses in a variety of settings, although we did not confine ourselves to these subjects. The courses for the case studies were chosen, after consultation, to be representative of different types of development in different settings. They were not chosen to be a statistically representative sample of all ACDP courses being developed, but it was felt that this choice would highlight common issues. Table 1.5 gives details of the sources of

Table 1.5 Sources of data in the ACDP study

	Number
Case-study courses examined	28
Case-study interviews conducted	33
Additional teaching staff in case-study courses who completed questionnaires	77
Specialist staff who completed evaluation forms for selected unit specifications	195

information for this study. Details of the courses chosen for the case studies are in Tables 1.6 and 1.7.

Table 1.6 *Types of case-study course*

	Number
Phase 1 Pilot	1
Phase 2 Pilot	12
Batch 1	15
Total	28

Table 1.7 *Composition of case-study courses*

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Batch 1	Total
Entirely locally devised HN units	1	12	1	14
Mixture of local and national HN units	-	-	9	9
Entirely nationally devised HN units	-	-	5	5
Total	1	12	15	28

▣ **Outline structure of the report**

Section two of this report focuses on the processes of implementing the Advanced Courses Development Programme. It begins with examples of the types of courses which we looked at in our case studies and explores some of the developmental processes and problems which they highlight. From this we attempt to draw out some of the implications of national versus local development of unit specifications and course frameworks, and the possible benefits and drawbacks of each approach. We then go on to look more closely at the support which staff received and at their experiences of the process of validation.

In section three we turn to features of the system itself. We begin with a discussion of the concept of competence, and the views which staff held on its applicability to advanced courses. From there we turn to an examination of the HN specifications themselves, the assessment system in use, and the place of merit awards within that system. This raises the issue of quality assurance, which is dealt with in section 3.5.

Section four looks at some of the effects which the ACDP has had on course structure and delivery. Principally these are dealt with under the headings of the effects on articulation between different courses and qualifications, and the effects on teaching methods in use.

The final section presents a summary of our findings and a discussion of their implications and our conclusions.

2 Processes of implementation

2.1 DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES AND ISSUES

■ The process of development

SCOTVEC's consultative paper on the future of advanced courses provision appeared in early 1987. In September 1990 the first of the 'Batch 1' courses began. In between there were three years of development work by SCOTVEC, further education colleges and central institutions throughout the country, including two pilot phases of courses beginning in 1988 and 1989. Needless to say there were changes and refinements to the system made throughout this period. Our findings suggest that these were partly the result of early ideas 'firming up', partly the result of SCOTVEC's own evaluations of the progress of the ACDP, and partly due to the influence of other initiatives such as the increasing role of lead bodies in defining competences and the development of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) which emerged as the ACDP progressed.

■ The questions to be addressed

Our first set of research questions asked us to consider what might be learned from this process of development. To give our findings some context we begin by offering four 'pen portraits' of the actual development process in four institutions and by a brief discussion of some of the issues these raise.

The main thrust of those research questions relating to the developmental process concerned the relative advantages and disadvantages of local and national approaches to unit specification development. We therefore begin our more detailed description of the data by considering our respondents' views on their experiences with these approaches.

In gathering this information, two additional features of the development process proved to be of interest to our respondents. The first of these was the nature and extent of support which staff felt they needed and received in developing new courses. The second was the process of validation, which is the final stage before courses are delivered. Both of these received such emphasis in our discussions with staff that we have chosen to give them separate emphases in this report.

■ Examples of development

Development work for the new courses could take one of three basic forms: it could be a national development in which HN Unit specifications

and course frameworks were developed by SCOTVEC National Development Officers for particular courses such as an HND in Accounting; it could be an entirely local development undertaken by a college (which would write all or some of its own unit specifications); or it could be some form of consortium development undertaken by two or more colleges. The initial pilot phases did not include nationally developed specifications.

To give a flavour of the reality behind the introduction of the new courses, the next four sub-sections present brief pen-portraits of four developments. These are not the only types of development which can occur within the ACDP, but they were real examples which we encountered in the colleges we visited. Other courses we enquired about shared features in common with one or more of these examples. We hope that describing them in this way will enable the reader to put much of the rest of this report in context.



2.1.1 Articulation as the motive

One of the main attractions of the ACDP for those central institutions which we visited was the additional opportunity it afforded for articulation. This was seen as offering a progression of courses from HNCs and HNDs to degrees with flexible entry and exit points.

In all of the central institutions which we visited such articulation was taking place, though not necessarily for every course. In the central institution which is the focus of this study, four of the six courses we looked at were HNDs introduced as Phase 2 pilot courses and designed to articulate with college degrees.

A member of the college senior management team explained that this articulation had been the intention from the outset, and was a major attraction of the ACDP:

... it's part of our institutional plan. We are dedicated to commonality and transferability ... we have been looking at the students being able to enter and exit with some form of qualification ... we haven't taken up the HNC so much, but ... It would be quite nice to have a one [HNC], one [HND], degree, honours degree ... [structure].

The attractiveness of courses which are shorter than a full degree course, particularly to older returners to education, was also commented on. Whether this was because of their lack of confidence in their ability, or unwillingness to commit themselves to a longer course, is debatable, but, whatever the reasons, this member of the senior management team clearly felt that combination of articulated courses and wider access which the ACDP afforded was a major benefit to the college:

I have spoken with potential access students and - it's amazing actually, I really was quite taken aback with it - just quite recently [one told me] 'I don't have the confidence to do a degree course, I'd rather do an HND first' ... I find it a surprising view, but it's quite widely held.

Not only were the Higher National courses in this college articulated upwards with degrees, they were also, where possible, delivered as part of

a 'suite' of courses sharing a common first year. To an extent this allowed students freedom to move sideways into an alternative course at the end of their first year if they found their original choice of course unattractive. One course leader explained how this worked:

The electronic engineering course and the computer aided engineering course are completely common in the first year ... after the first year they can decide which course they actually want to go to and transferring is no problem because they've done all the subjects, the common subjects

Thereafter students in these subjects can progress either to the (Ordinary) BSc degree course, or to the (Honours) BEng course which the college runs.

■ Summary

The reasons why the staff of this college were keen to be involved with the ACDP from the outset are clear. Here was the opportunity to use the flexibility it offered in designing their own units to develop a progression of courses with a variety of entry and exit points. Of course, in this college, as in the others, there were difficulties. We will turn to a deeper analysis of the implications for staff of designing courses in this way both in some of the studies below and later in the chapter where we look at support and validation. But what is clear from this study and a number of the others we conducted is that the ACDP was seen as having substantial potential to meet the need for flexible articulation.

■ 2.1.2 Adopting national unit specifications

While some staff saw the ACDP as an opportunity to make substantial innovations to their course structures not all departments in all colleges wanted, or needed, to take advantage of this opportunity.

This was the case for both an HND Accounting course and an HND Computing course in one FE college we visited. Both courses were introduced in 1990 as part of the Batch 1 implementation and the main focus within their development was on transferring existing courses into the unitised system using nationally devised unit specifications.

Interestingly, the amount of change which this transfer involved seemed to differ substantially between the two courses. The Accounting course had much in common with the course that it replaced, but the situation in Computing, which is in any case a fast developing subject was different:

I couldn't honestly say that it was really similar at all. The only thing that probably more or less exists from the old course are the COBOL units that we do ... I would say it's just about totally different.

The adoption of nationally developed unit specifications does not obviate the need for the college staff to do any development work of their own.

They still have to take the unit specifications, flesh them out and turn them into a deliverable course.

Although the units are nationally developed, the structure of the course, how we approach the units, I would say that is ours ... and obviously the teaching approach [and] the assessing of it, it's all local. We didn't have anything really from anybody else that we used.

Nor was it always regarded as an entirely problem free exercise to take the specifications and flesh them out into courses. Some were found to be relatively easy, but in other cases there could be problems of interpreting the unit writers' intentions.

Although the staff we spoke with in this FE college had considerable National Certificate experience to draw upon, the writing of advanced courses documentation and the validation procedures were completely new to them. However, there was a general perception amongst those we interviewed that staff had been reliant on their own efforts in developing courses, and that much had occurred in an almost *ad hoc* fashion.

This was confirmed by a member of the college senior management team who claimed that there had been little outside support available - 'In general we've got on with it and that's it - we've had to get on with it', and that the college was limited in the amount of support it could itself provide:

In terms of cost we have to be very careful with our funding ... we did not have the cash or the time to let staff go away on staff development for any considerable length of time to do this kind of work. They had to do it in their own time.

It was our impression that these problems led a few lecturers to have less regard for the new courses than they had for the courses they had replaced and with which they were more familiar:

... I'm not convinced that the whole idea of training accountants wasn't better served by the old course. In fact I am convinced that it was better served by the old course.

Overall, however, bypassing the initial development of specifications was welcomed at least in the early stages of introducing the ACDP. But the option to have greater input at a later stage was also seen as attractive.

I think the idea of the [nationally developed] units coming in on their own was enough to cope with at the time without actually getting involved in producing locally developed units. ... I could see us maybe getting involved in putting some locally developed units in [to cover areas which] the students could do with knowing. I think perhaps over the years we'll all get involved in that.



Summary

These courses were part of the Batch 1 phased transition to the new system. What is interesting is that the staff concerned chose to rely entirely on nationally developed units in developing their courses, and for a clear reason: essentially, staff felt that using these units would allow them to

become familiar with the new Advanced Courses more quickly. This strategy was not without problems, but it clearly had advantages for many staff.

2.1.3 College collaboration

Consortium developments come in a number of varieties. There are large national consortia which have been set up to develop units and courses of wide acceptability; others are smaller affairs involving no more than two colleges who collaborate in order to spread the workload of unit writing. One consortium which we looked at fell into the latter category. It involved a central institution cooperating with a further education college in a neighbouring region. A combination of circumstances in the two colleges led them to opting for a consortium development of a Phase 2 pilot course.

In the central institution, one department was offering a range of HND and degree provision in all its subjects except one, which had only the degree. They had taken a policy decision that they should be offering a range of levels of provision in all subjects and therefore decided to develop an HND to accompany this degree. Meanwhile the further education college was already offering an HND in this subject under SCOTVEC's pre-unitised system and were beginning to think about developing a new course under the ACDP. However, there were some doubts about whether they would be able to develop a new HND in time to take part in the pilot phase of the ACDP. Since the central institution is not geographically distant from the FE college, it became apparent that its new HND could have an effect on the FE college. The suggestion was made that the two institutions should collaborate on developing a pilot course which would be delivered separately and would articulate with the CI's degree course. The head of department in the CI explained the benefits which they saw in this arrangement:

... we then decided we'd get involved with ... a consortium ... to our mutual advantage. They had an advantage in it in that they could also develop an articulated course to ... this degree. So we got approval to offer an HND, they got a linked course which they could advertise to offer a degree which they weren't approved to do ...

Because the new course was intended to articulate to an already existing degree, the colleges did not have a completely free hand in designing it. Indeed, to a very large extent, much of it would be pre-determined:

... we had a course scheme in mind - we had a top down system of working ... As the course had to articulate with our honours degree provision, there was a framework and a content already available ...

The fact that the HND is based on the first two years of this already existing degree led to some interesting differences of emphasis in the two colleges about exactly whose course it was. The head of department in the CI could state at the 'official' level that:

... that was our working basis that there was no senior institution or junior institution or anything like that. We're totally equal, we just do different things ...

Nevertheless, the course leader in the CI would go on to say that:

... it wasn't a joint development ... in a way it wasn't even a development as an HND ... I was constrained by what was being taught on the already approved degree.

His counterpart in the FE college, whilst ready to admit the constraints caused by this adaptation of the CI's course, was more inclined to see the development work in terms of unitisation and the writing of specifications, and not simply a matter of defining course content.

However, while respondents in both colleges recognised that the origins of the course content might lie in the CI's degree, the staff in the FE college had much to offer in terms of expertise relevant to the ACDP:

... generally speaking up until relatively recently we didn't teach any HNDs. So national units are something that we don't really know all that much about ... [the FE college] are better at that ... (CI Course Leader)

... they had never run an HND in [this subject] at all, whereas we had run it for about ten years previously. So in effect, it might seem strange, but I think we had more expertise in the HND field than they had because they had straightforward degree courses. We cooperated with them. (FE college course leader)

The course was written and validated in time to become a Phase 2 pilot. Now that it is running, cooperation between the two colleges continues:

... we meet about three times a year. Their students come up here and use some of our equipment, we've demonstrated material to them, we liaise, we have a common external assessor, we share comments with the external assessor - well, if we're going to accept their students for a start, they want to know if they're doing the same things as us and we share our problems with each other ... (CI Head of Department)

The two colleges are continuing to collaborate on further development work for the re-validation of the course, at which time it will have to be written in competence terms. Interestingly, the CI is now also considering changing the structure of its degree, and the experience with the HND is having an influence on the proposed changes:

The joint development of the new course is going ahead now, and it's quite interesting that the impetus for changing the degree will be the HND, and it will be unitised at the same time ... And I think the degree will benefit from it. (CI Course Leader)

Neither of these colleges would have initially chosen to be involved in the consortium development, but the provision within the ACDP for such developments would appear to have made it possible for them to have developed this course more quickly than would have been the case if they had been working separately. The sharing of experience and expertise, and the subsequent collaboration in place of competition seems, from the comments of those involved, to have been of benefit to both institutions.



Summary

The origins of these developments obviously lie both in the basic need to transfer existing courses into HN Units and the potential of ACDP to provide articulation between courses at various levels. In this study, however, two different themes emerge. The first is recognition that articulation need not be confined to courses within individual colleges. There is also scope for articulation between courses amongst colleges and certainly in this case study the outcome was felt to have been advantageous to both parties. The second new theme is not entirely unrelated. Collaboration between the two colleges seems to have paid dividends in the support staff were able to offer each other. This is a theme to which we will return later in the chapter.



2.1.4 Joint development between college and industry

One of our case studies concerned a new and highly innovatory course which was jointly developed and delivered by a central institution and a major international company. The course was an HND in the general area of manufacturing technology but both the college course leader and the company representative to whom we spoke stressed that it was a broadly based course with three main strands: interpersonal skills, management skills and technology. It was introduced as a Phase 2 pilot and was, from the outset, written entirely in competence terms.

The employer concerned has an evident commitment to staff training and development. In addition to the HND, the company has established relationships with other colleges and universities and was providing a range of courses for its employees, including MBAs and MScs. The company supported the development of this HND, not only by seconding a member of the college staff for six months, but also by devoting a substantial amount of its own staffs' time to the work.

While the HND was primarily aimed at 'shopfloor' employees involved directly in manufacturing, the company maintained an open access policy and allowed anyone to enrol, provided they could demonstrate sufficient commitment.

One afternoon a week of company time was allocated to the course, but employees had also to commit themselves to twilight classes and there was an expectation that they would undertake around ten hours per week studying in their own time. There had been three staggered intakes to the course, totalling approximately 90 employees from all areas of the company, including finance and administration as well as manufacturing. Many of the employees opting to take the course already had qualifications or relevant skills and, to take account of this, the course involved an element of accreditation of prior learning.

The college course leader explained that the initial impetus for the course had come from the company:

Really it's down to [the company] and their desires to educate and upgrade the standard of personnel within the organisation ...

Nevertheless, the actual development of the course was not simply a matter of providing the company with what it asked for:

Everyone had a part to play. [The college] had an influence. [The course leader] had a good idea of what he thought we needed, [the company] had a good idea of what we needed and the two came together. It was very much a partnership.

The representative of the company also explained that, while their intention within the company was to acquire a more flexible and skilled workforce for their own benefit, it was also expected that the course, once developed, would have a wider application. The HND course, he explained:

... offers the opportunity for students to broaden their business knowledge, improve their technical knowledge while providing an opportunity for personal development. It was also envisaged at an early stage that [the course] would become available to general industry outwith [the company]

A great many demands were made on the team developing the course. It had originally been intended to allow a year for design, development and validation but, following a suggestion from the company, this was accelerated and the course in fact took its first intake of students only six months after the beginning of development. Some existing nationally developed unit specifications were used, but there were also a number of new unit specifications to be written.

I was seconded to [the company] in September for a month, full-time, and then I was virtually three days a week, and after the month I'd to take back my normal duties here. So it was seven days a week and 1-2 o'clock in the morning for 6 months. We eventually went through internal vetting in February and validation in March and we started in April. So it was a timescale which the principal complimented us on and I told him in return that I hoped it wasn't going to be the norm!

Both the college course leader and the company representative praised SCOTVEC for the assistance they had provided. The college course leader also noted that:

... the advanced courses programme offered a means to an end, whereas the old HND system would have been more difficult. They didn't have the same degree of flexibility ...

Both the college course leader and the company representative thought that the development of the course had had a beneficial impact. For the company representative this was the increased motivation of those employees involved in the course as well as the fact that 'in the long term, they will be better equipped to tackle more varied and complex tasks'. The college course leader thought that:

... the major benefit has been that we have developed what is perceived to be a very attractive course [which] fulfils a need in industry and for a sector of industry ... or a population in industry who for one reason or another have not been able to go to undertake education ...

Summary

This final study is perhaps the least typical of the four but it clearly illustrates the flexibility of HN Units and courses, and not least their potential to nurture sound relationships between education and industry. Questions can, of course, be asked about it. Would it have been possible for the college to get involved in such close collaboration with a smaller or less committed employer? Will SCOTVEC have the resources to provide the kind of support it offered in this development to all collaborative ventures between colleges and industry? The answers to these questions will probably only become clear as the ACDP progresses. In the meantime, this case study offers yet another theme arising from the development process – the potential of using the system to meet the needs of industry.

2.1.5 The case studies in perspective

Several themes emerge from these case studies which will be revisited throughout this report. First, the studies identify a number of reasons why staff and colleges have been motivated to move, often rapidly, towards ACDP course design. These include the opportunity to build articulation and progression into the courses available, the chance to develop consortium arrangements between institutions to their mutual advantage, and using the ACDP structure to meet the needs of industry. Clearly the basic philosophy underpinning the ACDP is seen by many practitioners as having considerable advantages.

A second theme which runs through the studies relates to the method of course development. In one study this involved the adoption of nationally developed unit specifications to 'unitise' existing courses but in the others, courses were built mainly around locally developed unit specifications. The advantages and disadvantages of local and national developments, and mixtures of both types, will be explored below.

An associated theme emerging in several studies was that of support. In one study there was some discontent with the level of support available while in another SCOTVEC was identified as a particularly useful source of help and advice. Support is important in the introduction of any major initiative and it was clearly an issue of concern to many respondents. It is therefore one of two major issues discussed at the end of this chapter. The other is course validation, which is the final stage of development before implementation can proceed.

2.2 LOCAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The first group of research questions which we identified in the introductory chapter focused on the strengths and weaknesses of local and national unit specifications. The case studies above have offered some insight into what developing in these ways meant to colleges. We can now turn in more detail to the views of our respondents on these matters.



Insights from the college and subject questionnaires

Relatively few of those teaching staff who responded to the college questionnaire had been involved in the writing of unit specifications, with only nine involved in nationally developed specifications and nineteen involved in locally developed specifications. Even fewer of these staff chose to make any comment on their experiences of developing unit specifications and little consensus was apparent in these comments. We are therefore unable to provide much in the way of quantitative information about involvement in the initial unit-writing process.

However, a larger number of these staff were involved in developing courses from the unit specifications. It was interesting to note that 25 out of the 47 who had worked from nationally devised specifications reported having no problems with them, but the corresponding figures for locally devised specifications were 30 out of 35; and for consortium specifications, 28 out of 35.

Lest the above figures should be interpreted as being an indication that locally developed specifications are *per se* easier to work with, we would point out that in the separate 'subject' questionnaire study we included two locally devised specifications. When these were given to subject experts in colleges which had not been involved in developing them, they proved to be no easier to work with than nationally developed specifications. The point would seem to be that those who have developed a specification know what is meant by the outcomes and criteria which it contains. Anyone else has to interpret them, and often finds it difficult to do so. As one interview respondent whose experience had led him to value locally devised specifications put it:

[With local units] we knew exactly what it was we were trying to do. When you come to flesh it out, in a sense, you've already made your decisions about how you're going to flesh it out ... Whereas if you're starting with someone else's thinking, you've got the usual problem of going through the words ... when you start trying to flesh out the centrally [ie nationally] devised unit, you start to wonder what the person was trying to do anyway.



Insights from the interviews

In the interviews it was apparent that the respondents saw the problems and opportunities presented by local and national units as being quite different from one another. An illustration of the perceived differences came from one member of staff who had been involved in all three types of course.

I've been involved in all three types ... and by far the hardest one to do is the independent local one from a college's point of view because you have to prove the need for the course, you're having to do all the industrial research, you've got to devise the units from scratch ... the workload on staff and the timing involved and the commitment that's required for a locally devised course is very very large, and you're on your own ... The one, from the perspective of teams who have to put

together the documents for validation, that seems the easiest is the nationally developed course ... essentially you're getting those packages together ... you've got a great part of the work done for you ... the consortium comes in between. You've still got to work with the members of the team.

Despite the amount of work involved a senior manager in another college (a CI) stressed that colleges welcomed the autonomy offered to them in developing their own units and courses:

We went through this painful process about three or four years ago now of discussing the question of what should SCOTVEC's role be and this college, in common with many others I think, said that we would like to be more independent, more self-determining.

As more and more nationally developed courses became available, and as the pilot courses which had been validated in his college became due for re-validation, this same respondent expressed the fear that 'I do detect that SCOTVEC are getting a bit more centralist, and I'm a believer in devolution and ownership of courses'. Another respondent saw similar benefits and had similar fears:

I think it's liberation, I think it's given us freedom to do, to teach and to assess in our own way, I think. Provided it is liberation, provided we're not going to get leant on by SCOTVEC ...

Another advantage claimed for local developments by one respondent was that they encouraged teaching staff to think critically about the courses they were teaching. He contrasted this with nationally developed courses, which may not require the same time and resources to be put into them, but equally did not require the same thought:

The biggest problem of recent years has been as existing HNCs and HNDs have been rolled over on to the new format, specifications have come from the centre, there's not been the same thinking ... I think that a lot of the thinking processes have been short circuited because you're then given something to do and just get on with it.

However, a warning note was sounded by a lecturer in another college who questioned the emphasis on local development and meeting 'particular needs'. He saw nationally developed unit specifications as more likely to be able to meet the *general* needs of industry and wondered if some of the local developments were based less on the meeting of needs than on personal interests of the unit developers:

There's a perception, rightly or wrongly, that the college written courses are based on some kind of need ... my own personal perception is that the college written ones are based on people's interests at the time ... presumably if the centrally (ie nationally) written ones are written properly they are written with the general needs of industry in mind.

Another member of staff questioned whether too much was being made of local autonomy. His view was that nationally developed unit specifications and course frameworks were likely to be more generally acceptable and have 'national currency':

I think that the question of locally produced units has to be addressed. I think that when they went down this idea of autonomy to colleges, that they went too far, that an HND ... has to have national currency ... I do think they need to look very closely at what goes into the national catalogue.

Despite this there was little doubt that those staff who had been involved in developing courses, in both FE colleges and CIs, felt a great deal of personal satisfaction from their achievement. The sense of 'ownership' which they felt was evident in some of their comments:

Now I think there's been much more ownership of this, this is our course and we wanted to make it a good course for the learners and we're responsible for it. This decentralisation and devolving has been a good thing.

Those of us who devised and taught and developed [the HND] the very earliest of pilots, we've had that chance to develop on something that we own, because it's our course, there are no central units in it, in its original form, at all, they were all college devised. And therefore we loved it, it was ours, we wanted to do well in it.

While nine of our interview respondents made specifically favourable comments about the increased sense of 'ownership' brought about through local development of unit specifications, there were no similarity enthusiastic comments made about nationally devised unit specifications. Although agreeing that this sense of ownership was a powerful motivator for staff, and a benefit of the system, one respondent pointed out that it did have the drawback that staff might then become defensive about 'their' course.

The pro side is that you have a much greater sense of ownership, you have much more identity with the locally devised course ... It's very satisfying when you've developed something yourself and you see it being successful in terms of the students going into these occupational areas. You then become fairly protective. One of the dangers is that you want to keep it to yourself.

Similarly, another respondent pointed out that, while staff might feel this sense of commitment to a course which they have developed, it was probably the case that nationally developed unit specifications, especially those developed more recently, were better written, in the sense that they were expressed properly in competence terms.

People who've written a unit probably feel wedded to it. An awful lot of blood, sweat and tears went into it. Some of the national units frankly are good, some of them are rotten, and it depends therefore which staff you speak to and which units they have seen ... Typically the national units are better linguistically ... because they're written by people who've been indoctrinated better in how to write these things, so they're less likely to have their little statement like 'should know about' ... Partly it's a variable on a time continuum, the more recent ones are better than the older ones usually ...

However, as we will show in section 3.2, the fact that unit specifications are written accurately in competence terms does not, in general, make them any easier for staff to work with. Locally devised specifications may or

may not be so well expressed in competence terms, but the staff who wrote them at least know what they mean.



Discussion

The main cost to centres of this innovation has been in terms of staff time and commitment. The question as to whether such investment is best made in the local or national development of unit specifications and course frameworks is therefore an important one. Unfortunately there was insufficient evidence to suggest that either approach was, in general, markedly better than the other. For as Table 2.1 shows, for each advantage there tends to be an equal and opposite disadvantage.

Table 2.1 Pros and cons of local versus national developments

	PRO	CON
Local Development	Encourages staff to think about nature and content of the course Designed to meet a perceived need Innovative courses possible Sense of ownership - staff 'feel wedded to it' and gain 'satisfaction' from its success Specifications are easier to understand because staff knew what they meant when they wrote them	Difficult and time consuming to develop Or is it just someone's hobby horse? But do they have 'national currency'? But can staff become over-protective towards it? But there is no guarantee that anyone else will find them any clearer than other specifications
National Development	Less work involved in devising course Should have national currency Outcomes tend to be expressed in more acceptable competence terms	Doesn't encourage the same critical thinking about the course But worry about 'centralist' tendency in SCOTVEC But no guarantee that they will be readily understood

However, there is an extent to which this 'unproven' verdict rests on a 'neutral' assumption about priorities. It reflects a rather liberal assumption about the responsibility of higher education institutions to set their own standards. It may not therefore adequately reflect the need for consistency in meaning required by end users or the clear national criteria which students perhaps ought to expect to be applied nationally on comparable courses. If that is to be the priority then it may well be that nationally developed unit specifications have the edge; the challenge to the development programme is to offer unit specifications which have sufficient clarity to allow everyone to understand them yet leave sufficient space for those who turn them into courses to feel they have a degree of ownership.

2.3 SUPPORT

The Advanced Courses Development Programme devolved much of the responsibility for course design, implementation and delivery to colleges.

For some staff some aspects of this represented a radical departure from their previous experience. For others, previous involvement in the National Certificate was seen to be beneficial as many of the ideas the Programme contained were less new to those familiar with the National Certificate than to those with no such experience:

The [FE college staff] have great experience in National Certificates and competences which we [CI staff] don't have, .. they were able to be of great assistance in terms of our early thinking about performance criteria and all the rest of it ... (CI Head of Department)

We were therefore interested to discover whether teaching staff felt that they had received sufficient advice and support in their implementation of the new courses.

Table 2.2 shows staff responses to a number of questions put to them in the college questionnaire about the advice and guidance they had received. It is clear that, with the exception of teaching and assessment methods, a majority of staff felt that they had not had sufficient support. This was particularly evident in those items dealing with articulation.

Table 2.2 Advice and guidance in the implementation of new courses

In your opinion have you had sufficient advice or guidance on each of the following:

	More than sufficient %	Sufficient %	Not quite sufficient %	Insufficient %
assessment methods N=76	4	49	30	17
teaching methods N=73	4	60	19	17
quality assurance N=75	1	42	32	25
articulation with NC courses N=66	3	33	27	37
articulation with degree courses N=70	1	33	29	37
articulation with other HNC/Ds N=66	2	32	27	39

We were interested to know what had been expected and where the support which had been provided came from. We pursued this question in interviews with college staff. The picture which emerged showed that in general, staff felt that there had not been sufficient support and that the process of development, for the main part, had been one of self-development and 'do-it-yourself'. While 12 of our interview respondents thought sufficient support had been available to them, 18 felt that it had been insufficient, one thought that what had been available was irrelevant to staff needs and two gave no answer.

It was clear from our data that, in the view of some staff, SCOTVEC in particular had fallen short of what had been expected from them in the way of support. Some staff were not happy with what was on offer whilst others were unaware that support of any nature was available to them. Before looking in more detail at staff comments it is therefore appropriate to consider what SCOTVEC did in fact provide in the way of support.

Part of the support for the ACDP provided by SCOTVEC took the form of the national development of HN Unit specifications and course frameworks, the issuing of guidelines, and the dissemination of information through eight issues of *Update*. At the outset of the Advanced Courses Development Programme it was also recognised by SCOTVEC that the success of the programme depended on effective staff development. They took it as their remit to identify target groups and their training needs and also to suggest methods of meeting these needs. The identified needs included the dissemination of information, help with validation procedures, the preparation of course documentation, help in writing units in terms of competences and assessment techniques.

Senior staff from centres were the first group to participate in staff development workshops. A seminar was arranged for staff from centres participating in the 1988-89 pilots. Following this, further talks were given to staff in other colleges involved in the pilots. A workshop was organised to enable National Development Officers to draw up guidelines on competence writing and the inter-relationship between knowledge and understanding (November 1988). Workshops were held early in 1989 for college staff participating in pilot courses. Since then, a number of seminars have been held primarily for senior staff. In addition, a series of staff development workshops was run by SCOTVEC for teaching staff involved in the preparation and validation of advanced courses. The material for these workshops was available for centres and regions to use within their own staff development programmes although they were not mentioned by any of our respondents when we gathered our data. SCOTVEC have confirmed that draft copies of its materials for ten additional staff development workshops were trial tested and made available to colleges in the summer of 1990. These were published with full tutor's notes in December 1990.

It must therefore be clear that SCOTVEC saw itself as having at least part of the responsibility for supporting the introduction of the ACDP and that it took a substantial range of initiatives to provide this. But how did this support meet the needs of the practitioner? What kind of support did they want and how did they think they got it?

❧ The support wanted by staff

It is interesting that none of our respondents cited the work done by SCOTVEC in producing nationally devised unit specifications, formulating guidelines or disseminating information through *Update*, as an aspect of 'support'. There were two kinds of support which staff felt that they needed. The first is predictable; they wanted to understand the terminology which was being used and they wanted to develop the skills which would be needed to introduce the new courses. We have already seen from the data above (Table 2.2) that many felt that their needs in these areas had not been fully met. The data from our interviews confirmed this and indeed tended to suggest that even in areas such as teaching and assessment, many staff still felt insecure.

The second kind of support was less tangible but nevertheless came through strongly as a perceived need in the interviews. In essence, they wanted stability and many of them felt that they had not been given it.

Several times in the interviews reference was made to the fact that the information provided by SCOTVEC kept changing. This resulted in frustration and confusion amongst teaching staff who were trying to develop courses:

... the goalposts would be changed as you went along anyway. You know, I would come in from one meeting with one answer to a question and then two days later something else would come through the post that told a different story.

... the writing of the units themselves was a difficult problem. Getting the right language, getting the active verb in the right place. Because when we started off the recommendations were that it had to be right at the beginning, and it ended up that it had to be at the end of the sentence ...

Officially, SCOTVEC policy for each phase of the development programme was set and should not have undergone these apparent changes. However, development work was continuing and it may be that these respondents were hearing about the developing thinking of those involved in ACDP and not distinguishing between this and the relevant official guidelines. It is unclear to what extent these were simply the normal problems one would expect in any rapidly developing programme, or whether they were the result of a failure of communication somewhere between SCOTVEC and the college staff who were actually implementing the ACDP. But, whichever is the case, an unfortunate repercussion of this is that it has led to a certain amount of suspicion of SCOTVEC even from those in favour of ACDP:

... it's given us freedom to do, to teach and to assess in our own way. On balance I'm positive about what they're trying to do, I'm not necessarily positive about the way that they're trying to do it.

❏ Where did staff see support coming from?

As we reported in section 2.1.4 above, in one college SCOTVEC was praised for the support which it had provided in the development of a highly innovative course developed in conjunction with a large employer.

... it was a new experience and really we were very reliant on SCOTVEC and I can't praise them enough for their assistance. I think they went beyond the call of duty in assisting us because I think they saw the fact that it was novel, innovative, encompassed a whole lot of new ideas, and as such it should be encouraged as a possible model for other industry/academia collaboration.

However, it has to be said that, in the interview data, this was very much the exception to the rule. At the level of the college lecturers developing these courses the amount of effective support available from SCOTVEC was frequently seen (rightly or wrongly) as being both limited and often confusing.

Where then did staff get support? There is much in the data which suggests that most of the work involved was done by individuals or small groups working on their own..

I think we did it ourselves, didn't we? There was a heck of a lot of late night meetings and shouting matches and reading and arguments about terminology ... Because we were venturing into the unknown I don't think we were looking for support. We knew roughly what we had to try to do and we were determined to force it through ... In casual conversation someone would say 'I've had an attempt at doing this' - 'Well fax it across to us and let's have a look' and that sort of thing

However, within the colleges themselves there was evidence that efforts had been made to enable the development to progress, whether by providing in-service training or by freeing staff time for the writing of units and courses.

These efforts, however, were recognised to have been limited by lack of resources, specifically in terms of what little the colleges seemed able to provide:

The advanced courses have been developed during a period of cutback and we've had to do it within existing resources which have not ... been adequate. So there's been very very little staff development

There were a few mentions of the use of CAST (now SFEU) in providing support although this was generally seen as meeting the needs of those 'who hadn't yet learned the language'.

Finally, although SCOTVEC was generally criticised by staff there were several examples which suggested that they placed considerable value on informal personal contacts with those who they saw as being 'associated' with SCOTVEC. Our respondents appeared to be drawing a distinction between full-time, permanent SCOTVEC officers and others, such as external course assessors and National Development Officers, who were temporarily fulfilling a role in the SCOTVEC 'team'.

For example, individual external course assessors were used as sources of advice and guidance. Other informal, personal sources of support reported included at least two instances of members of staff who were seconded to SCOTVEC as NDOs, and whose experience was regarded as valuable.

We did have one of us seconded to SCOTVEC as a National Development Officer, he used to come back from time to time. We ran a session which we used to call 'Parliamo SCOTVEC', which really takes me back a bit, you know, learning the language. They'd obviously done exercises like that before when they were putting the pilot courses through.



Summary

As part of SCOTVEC's dissemination policy the newsletter, *Update* has kept practitioners informed of procedures and progress in the Advanced

Courses Development Programme. In an early issue (No. 3) the following statement was made indicating the importance SCOTVEC attached to staff development and what it saw as the role of various bodies in it:

The ultimate success of the Programme will depend on the widespread knowledge and understanding of the Council's procedures and philosophy. In achieving this SCOTVEC will rely on the assistance of many other bodies, including Her Majesty's Inspectorate, Local Authorities, Professional and Industrial Bodies and the School of Further Education. It is also anticipated that the Curriculum Advice and Support Team will play an important role.

The form that SCOTVEC's subsequent support programme took strongly suggests that what it intended was a cascade approach to dissemination. What is not at all clear is whether this worked so well that the teaching staff receiving it were virtually unaware of SCOTVEC's involvement, or so badly that it never got through to them. What is clear is that many staff felt that they had not received the support they needed and rightly or wrongly they pinned the blame on SCOTVEC.

It is also interesting to note that few staff identified other institutions such as the local authorities and professional and industrial bodies as having failed to give support but neither did they claim that they had received support from them. Perhaps this simply reflects the low expectations which staff have of these sources of support and the high, one might argue in some cases over-optimistic view, they have of what SCOTVEC can and should provide.

No development will ever have unlimited resources available to support its implementation and, to that extent, there is always likely to be some dissatisfaction but, in our opinion, there are three lessons to be learned from this experience. First, it is important that **all** involved in such a development should know from the outset who they **should** be looking to for support and what they can reasonably expect from this. This might require more sharing of responsibility for such decisions but it would at least make clear who is accountable for support and also clarify the real resource implications for all concerned.

Second, these data suggest that 'informational' support is not sufficient in itself. The support most valued by staff seemed to be that on offer from those who could give them help in actually carrying out their tasks. This included external course assessors, NDO's and colleagues from their own and other colleges. Questions have to be asked about whether traditional cascade approaches to dissemination yield support of this kind. If they do not then their use is unlikely to result in support which satisfies practitioners' needs.

The final lesson arises from what is probably at the root of most of the criticisms staff made. There can be little doubt that everyone involved in this Programme, and this includes SCOTVEC, has suffered from the policy changes they have had to meet and the effects of developing courses when methodologies relating to such matters as 'competence', 'merit' and 'the place of knowledge and understanding' are still under development.

The lesson is that it is extremely difficult to support innovations which are constantly changing. Perhaps if the main phase of 'Batch 1' development had not been started until there had been sufficient time to learn all that was possible from the pilot stages, some of these problems could have been avoided. However, it must be added that it was pressure from the colleges themselves which led to the decision to move straight from pilot Phase 2 to implementation of Batch 1 courses.

2.4 VALIDATION

Once units and courses have been developed within colleges they require to be validated before they can be delivered. Staff in central institutions are generally familiar with validation procedures through their involvement with CNAAB but we expected that staff in further education colleges would have less experience to draw on and hence might have different views. In fact, in the comments made in interviews we could find little to distinguish between staff from these different sectors. There were one or two anecdotal tales of FE staff who had betrayed their inexperience in presenting their case in the very earliest of validations, but by the time these interviews took place such initial diffidence seemed to have disappeared.

In all the colleges which we visited we found that some form of internal, or 'mock' validation took place before the official validation. In all but one college, and particularly within the central institutions, this was a fairly formal process, sometimes seen as being more rigorous than the official validation:

It went very successfully. We got a much easier passage with the external one than we got with the internal one ... I think the internal one is much more rigorous.

Overall positive and negative views on the experience of validation were expressed in similar proportions in both central institutions and further education colleges. Negative views tended to be prompted by particular bad experiences, or lingering doubts about the efficacy of the system, but many staff, even amongst those who had found validation stressful, appreciated the scrutiny and thoroughness of the validation panels. For some it was apparent that this had provided a welcome reassurance to them about the worth of the course they had developed:

The second stage was the full validation where we had representatives from SCOTVEC on the panel. And I remember that was really a very good day. I don't know, everything had seemed to come together ... I remember that at the first validation [internal] we were a bit disheartened, but at the second validation that really went very well with us.

The composition of the panel was very acceptable, both educationally and from manufacture and industry. So I think it was a very effective exercise certainly.

... the chairman was a very courteous and fair person ... But without doubt it gave us a lot of thought at the end of the day. I would say it

was a very worthwhile experience ... it made you feel that there was a scrutiny and an intensity that rarely is applied to your normal in-house courses.

That such views were expressed in respect of 18 out of the 28 courses we looked at must indicate a reasonable degree of satisfaction with validation procedures, even at this early stage of development.

One of the major causes of concern amongst those who had more negative views stemmed from cases where individual panel members had either become, as the respondents saw it, over-zealous, or had seemed to step out of their appointed role. Sometimes this led to a sense of injustice on the part of the respondents, particularly in cases where the course being validated was a replacement for an existing course which the department concerned had been presenting for some time.

It was an absolute disaster the first time round ... In my opinion [a panel member who had written some of the national unit specifications] couldn't distinguish which role he was playing ... when you asked a question he was incredibly defensive - 'These are mine! You daren't criticise them!' - I think that was basically the foundation of the somewhat traumatic experience we had.

It was rather difficult for us ... we had [a panel member] who took over, almost entirely took over the whole validation ... it became very confrontational between him and the course team ... but the SCOTVEC people never said anything ... what annoyed us was that we had been running these courses ... for years and years and years, and here was someone coming along and just chopping the thing to pieces.

Cases such as these may, of course, be simply matters of inexperience on the part of the panel members and might, as a result, be less likely to happen in future. However, five such cases were reported to us by staff in support of their view that there is a degree of inconsistency between validations which must lead to some doubt about the effectiveness of the system:

I understand that the validation that we went through was a much more severe validation than some of the validations that I've heard about where the term 'rubber stamp' has been used ... It is dependent on the make up of the panel, I'm quite convinced of that ... the trouble is the hearings can be unfair, you just have to get a confrontation between say a senior member of the team and a senior member of the validation panel and you've got trouble. So one has to ask the question 'Is this a valid system?'

We have no data to confirm or refute these views, but the fact that they are held by some staff must be a matter of concern if the system is not to suffer through lack of confidence.

Other minor procedural problems were noted by respondents. One, in a central institution, welcomed the move by SCOTVEC towards adopting CNA style validations, but thought that they were still going through a learning process and was wary of a tendency which he perceived for validations to become dominated by checklists. A course leader in another college reported difficulty in one case in receiving official

confirmation of what was decided at the validation, and was actually delivering the course before official validation was finally granted.

Further complications were reported, particularly in central institutions, in cases of joint or dual validations. In one case a course was jointly developed by a central institution and a further education college and it was not at all clear, at least not to the respondent in the central institution, who was validating who. Another central institution felt aggrieved when a similar course (again jointly developed with a further education college, and designed to articulate with the central institution's degree programme) had entirely separate validations in the two institutions. Articulation of courses also caused validation problems where dual validation (usually by both SCOTVEC and CNAAB) was required. These could be further complicated if the course was designed to attract the recognition of a professional body. The course designers could then find themselves having to meet three sets of requirements which may not always be entirely congruent.



Summary

These data strongly suggest that external validation of courses is seen by staff as legitimate and valuable, particularly as a reassurance to them that their interpretation of the ACDP structure is appropriate. The data also suggest that the systems for validation implemented by SCOTVEC are appropriate although there were also signs that some of the detailed aspects of validation such as the role of the validation team members was not always clear. There was also doubt expressed about the extent to which the outcome of validation depends on the membership of the individual committee which, if legitimate, must raise questions about reliability.

In general, however, many of these validation problems could be described as teething troubles which might be expected to lessen as experience of the system increases. They may also diminish as staff acquire greater familiarity with quality assurance procedures and as further agreement is reached between SCOTVEC and other awarding bodies on their respective roles in validating courses which attract dual recognition.

3 Component parts of the system

In Section 2 we looked at the experience of getting the system 'up and running'. In this section we focus on a number of particular features of the programme which will help us to answer the questions identified as 2.1-2.4 in chapter one.

In all we cover five such features. We begin with one of the fundamental building blocks of the ACDP – the notion of competence. From this we move to ask how staff responded to the actual unit specifications once they were put into practice. Our third focus is staff experience of conducting assessments within the programme which is not unrelated to the fourth topic, the award of 'merit' classification for student performance. We conclude by examining staff views on quality assurance within advanced courses provision.

3.1 COMPETENCE

■ What is competence?

In their fully developed form HN Units are intended to produce students who are competent to perform in particular vocational areas. This places a greater emphasis on the acquisition of skills and the performance of tasks than was the case with previous courses where there was a greater emphasis on knowledge and theory.

There was certainly a perception amongst those we interviewed that the new HN Units were more concerned with practical and vocational outcomes, and less concerned with theory, than the courses which they replaced. In interview, twelve of our respondents saw this as a wholly positive development, six as wholly negative, and fourteen had mixed views about its benefits or otherwise.

Those who approved of the move towards a greater emphasis on competence tended to see its benefits in terms of vocational relevance and practicality for both the students and their employers.

I believe in competence based learning ... I am certainly convinced that we should be producing people who have skills to apply rather than knowledge they can talk about.

■ Problems of definition

The interview respondents who viewed competence positively all had a clear notion of it as the ability to perform successfully on the job. However, many of those who had 'reservations' also admitted to being uncertain about the definition of 'competence':

... competence I don't think has been properly thought about or properly defined ... at the moment the definition is so fluid that we think that we're doing what people want us to do and then we go along and somebody else has a totally different idea of what competence is.

Part of the problem for some college staff is the unfamiliarity of the language used in discussing competence. There were cases where this language - often dismissed as 'jargon' - created an initial barrier to the acceptance of competence as a valid concept.

... there was a fair amount of resistance to it to start with. I think it was the jargon, performance criteria, competence based, criterion referenced - you know it better than I do. I think there was a lot of suspicion about the jargon, but I think there's less now, I think they see that what someone can do is quite important

The suggestion in this data is that as staff become more familiar with the notion of competence they will become less antagonistic towards it. However, it would be wrong to suggest from this that problems associated with 'competence' are confined to initial attitudes. There are some important pragmatic issues which these data also suggest remain to be tackled. Amongst these we particularly noticed problems with the place of 'knowledge and understanding'.



What is the place of knowledge?

At no time have SCOTVEC said that knowledge-based outcomes cannot be included in HN Unit specifications and, indeed, such outcomes are an acknowledged feature of non-advanced National Certificate provision. However, the notion of competence as being expressed through the performance of a skill or task, in the view of some of our respondents, raised questions about the place of the more abstract outcomes of education, in particular the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to think about what you are doing. Partly this was expressed as a fear that what were seen as relatively low level competences which were easily assessed would come to dominate HN Units at the expense of other, more complex, skills. A more general point was that not everything lent itself readily to being expressed in competence terms.

If you could ... manufacture a sub-cellular element of a cell as a performance criterion ... you'd get the Nobel prize tomorrow. So all we hope that kids will do is literally to develop an understanding of what they are. But this was heretical, it wasn't a proper performance criterion and we said 'Rubbish, we will defend ... any group of biologists anywhere, because if you didn't understand, not simply note, list, determine, name or whatever it was, but have an understanding of what they did in relation to each other, your future as a biologist is gone, it's irrelevant. It's just the basic building block'.

Sometimes the effort to write what were seen as comparatively straightforward 'knowledge and understanding' elements in this way, simply because of the demands of the system, was seen as an unnecessary complication and wasteful of time and energy.

[in some subjects] a lot of the stuff really boils down to knowledge and understanding, and to couch that in competence terms takes a feat of semantic gymnastics that isn't always, in my opinion, productive.

Some respondents even went so far as to claim that the perceived stress on competent performance devalued the knowledge and understanding elements. This led them to see it as less demanding and of lesser value.

I think that a focus on competence, an absolute focus on doing things and a relative diminution of a real need for students to know things which are then used, is a slowly descending spiral towards lack of quality ... I think things are getting simplistic, compartmentalised, associated only with training rather than education.

At higher academic levels competences were thought to be both more difficult to define and somehow more limiting for the students. Such views were expressed both by FE college staff, who tended to make comparisons with the National Certificate, and central institution staff, whose natural point of comparison was with degree courses or previous HNC/D courses:

... there's still a very great deal of doubt as to how you would describe the job of a professional engineer in competence terms. And of course that's reflected back down to the technician level. It's a bit easier at the technician level, but I think there are still some problems.

College staff had mixed reasons for holding such views, not all of which reflected directly on the HNUnits specifications themselves. One respondent pointed out that, while there may be some difficulties inherent in competence-based approaches, the views of some staff may be coloured by an element of prejudice:

[Staff] have very mixed feelings about it ... principally because they're from a background of theoretical learning themselves and there is a feeling that they're devaluing it by taking it down to a competence level ... we're used to the knowledge and understanding of theory elements ... It's [also] difficult to make [some subjects] competence-based ... And I think that the third point is that competence-based learning came through the National Certificate which was the lower level ... a degree of academic snobbery comes into it.



Discussion

These views on the place of knowledge in a competence-based system will be familiar to those aware of the difficulties which Lead Bodies designing 'standards' for approval by SCOTVEC in Scotland and NCVQ in England and Wales have encountered. There can be no doubt that it has proved more difficult to apply the 'job competence model' to higher level vocational qualifications. It remains to be seen how this model will be applied to the proposed 'general' SVQs which are not intended to be linked to specific vocational areas. It may be that the needs of further and higher education imply a different approach from that used in the setting of industry-led standards.

However, there was little in the data to suggest that staff were aware of the fundamental principle which is at the centre of this debate, viz.,

whether or not competent *performance* inevitably subsumes the knowledge and understanding which underpins it and therefore renders the separate assessment of knowledge superfluous. There may well be sound arguments that 'understanding' outcomes are appropriate in certain 'theoretical' and 'educational' contexts and, indeed, the SCOTVEC position on this in relation to HN Units is not as clear as it is for the National Certificate (within the National Certificate there is a clear and well defined place for what SCOTVEC call 'cognitive competences', but there is no correspondingly explicit statement in official documentation for HN Units and courses). But the staff position would have been more convincing if it had been based on a more sophisticated argument than preservation of that which is familiar.

However, it is probably unrealistic to expect teaching staff to have been fully aware of the complexities of this debate at the time these data were gathered. Nor would it be appropriate to accept some teachers' arguments that the fault lay with SCOTVEC for 'concealing' a clear understanding. The debate continues today: if there is a criticism it is that in some cases staff were being asked to implement a competence model which they believe will not prove sufficiently robust to cope with the varying circumstances in which it is being applied.

3.2 HIGHER NATIONAL UNIT SPECIFICATIONS

■ Clarity of the specifications

HN Unit specifications are at the heart of the new advanced courses system. It is these specifications which provide the blueprint for course developers and, ultimately, classroom teachers. Each unit specification must include the following elements:

- HN Unit title;
- general competence for unit;
- access statement;
- credit value;
- outcomes and associated performance criteria;
- context in which performance criteria are to be met;
- criteria for the award of PASS and MERIT.

Unit specifications have been, and continue to be, prepared in a variety of ways. Some have been prepared nationally under the supervision of SCOTVEC; others have been prepared locally by individual colleges; and there are also unit specifications which have been prepared by groups of colleges working together as consortia. In each case, however, the occupational competences which the specifications embody are expected to have been identified by industry Lead Bodies, where such Lead Bodies exist, or by consultation with appropriate industrial, commercial or professional bodies where no Lead Bodies exist.

Of the components of the unit specifications the most important are the outcomes and performance criteria. It is these which, in operational terms, define the competences which the students must achieve. It is therefore essential that they state clearly and unambiguously what it is that the students should be able to do, and the level of attainment which they must achieve, for success in the unit. We know from previous work on National Certificate module descriptors just how difficult it can be to write such clear and unambiguous statements. We were therefore interested to see how college staff viewed the quality of the specifications which they dealt with.

We did this in two ways. In our general interviews with college staff we gathered their comments on the unit specifications which they used. In cases where staff had been involved in developing the specifications we were also interested in the process of development.

In addition, we also conducted a separate study of a selected range of HN Unit specifications. These were selected both to be representative of common subject areas, and to be representative of units within subject areas, a choice which was confirmed by the subject specialists themselves. Nationally developed specifications in each of Management, Accounting, Computing, Communication and Engineering were chosen. In addition, we included two locally developed unit specifications, one each in Communication and Engineering. Copies of these specifications, together with an evaluation questionnaire, were sent to subject specialists in FE colleges and central institutions throughout Scotland. The numbers of 'subject' questionnaires which we had returned to us are detailed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Subject specialists completing evaluation questionnaires

Unit Specification	Number of responses
Management (nationally developed)	21
Accounting (nationally developed)	33
Computing (nationally developed)	43
Communication (nationally developed)	32
Communication (locally developed)	23
Engineering (nationally developed)	31
Engineering (locally developed)	12
Total returns	195



The results from the interviews

When asked what they thought made a good specification there was a distinct consensus amongst those whom we interviewed that the most important feature should be that it is clear and understandable:

Clarity I think is the principal thing ... I think the specification, as written, must have a clear meaning to both the lecturer teaching the stuff and the student learning the stuff. And besides that of course its got to meet the overall aims of the course, as intended by the course development board.

However, some respondents pointed out to us that it was not always immediately apparent if even a seemingly clear specification would turn out to be so in practice. There appeared to some to be a great deal of scope for differences of interpretation which only come into the open when staff are beginning to work with the specifications:

... we tend to get into problems when we look at performance criteria and try to interpret them in a reliable way. You get three or four people round a table and they have three or four ideas about what the PC standard would be like ... that's where we've had the problem with the specifications. We think we know what we're about, but when we sit down and start talking about it we've clearly got different ideas of how difficult we should make it and I should say that's the biggest difficulty.

There was also an alleged obscurity of much of the language used in the specifications. In some cases this was held to be quite different from the language used by subject specialists. Other complaints focused on the unfamiliarity of expressing things in competence terms and the difficulty in adhering to guidelines on writing outcomes issued by SCOTVEC:

... I mean writing units is a linguistic exercise. You don't simply write down what they have to do, you have to translate it into competence terms, which means, what language you are allowed to use. The whole language that all of us are used to - 'know' and 'understand' and being able to 'remember' - suddenly you weren't allowed to have that. And even phrases such as 'explain', 'justify', some of that was a bit sort of stretching the language ...

For some staff who had been involved in writing unit specifications there were fewer problems as they knew what they had had in mind when developing the units:

[With local units] we knew exactly what it was we were trying to do. When you come to flesh it out, in a sense, you've already made your decisions about how you're going to flesh it out ... whereas if you're starting with someone else's thinking, you've got the usual problem of going through the words ... when you start trying to flesh out the centrally devised unit you start wondering what the hell the person was trying to do anyway.

Other attributes of the 'ideal' specification for the staff interviewed were that it should not attempt to cover too much content, it should not demand too much assessment and it should have a 'structure' (by which some respondents appeared to mean that one outcome should follow on naturally from another). Unfortunately not all unit specifications met the ideals of these staff. As a result some interviewees complained that their interpretation of the specifications led to them having to include too much content to cover in the time available, or too many assessments to tackle:

It would appear as if they've just sort of pulled as much as they can from a wide range of references and stuck it into this unit, and to me it's like trying to put a quart into a pint pot ... I think that's just overloaded.

Insights from the subject questionnaire

It was therefore questions related to clarity and ease of use which we addressed in our detailed subject questionnaire study. Staff were asked to rate the clarity of the main components of the specifications on a four-point scale. They were also asked to say whether the information supplied enabled them to form a clear idea of how students might best be assessed, and whether they thought that there was sufficient information for them to 'flesh out' the specification into a form suitable for teaching. The results are summarised in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 *Clarity of aspects of the unit specification*

	Very clear	1	2	3	4	Not at all clear
In your opinion, are the competences or skills specified in the learning outcomes of this unit defined clearly and unambiguously? (N=195)		20	40	24	16	
In your opinion, is the content, context or knowledge to be covered by each of the learning outcomes in this unit clear and unambiguous? (N=190)		19	40	22	19	
In your opinion, is the level of attainment specified by the performance criteria for each of the learning outcomes defined clearly and unambiguously? (N=186)		18	30	21	31	
From the information given in the unit specification, is it clear how you might best assess the students who are taking this unit? (N=190)		14	26	22	38	
	More than sufficient	1	2	3	4	Less than sufficient
Do you think that the information contained in this unit specification is sufficient to allow you to 'flesh it out' into a teaching package? (N=185)		19	44	20	17	

(All figures are percentages)

These data suggest that a majority of staff feel that the outcomes themselves and the content, context and knowledge to be covered are reasonably well defined. They indicate a reasonable degree of confidence that the

specifications offer sufficient information from which to 'flesh out' a teaching package. However, they also suggest a comparative lack of confidence about how best to assess the students.

These overall figures also disguise the fact that, for every component, there turned out to be a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the responses for the different unit specifications. For each component we therefore ranked the specifications in order of their perceived degree of clarity so that we could draw comparisons between them. The results are shown in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Rank order of specifications

Note: exact wording of questions asked is as in Table 3.2

	Management	Accounting	Computing	Communication (National)	Communication (Local)	Engineering (National)	Engineering (Local)
Competences as defined by learning outcomes	4	3	2	7	6	1	5
content/context/ knowledge	5	1	3	7	4	2	6
performance criteria	4	2	3	7	5	1	6
assessment	4	3	2	7	5	1	6
'fleshing out' into teaching package	5	2	3	7	6	3	1

Each specification is ranked 1-7 for each aspect of the specification.

1 = More staff in this subject area were more satisfied with the clarity of the specification than in any other subject area.

7 = Staff in this subject were the least satisfied with the clarity of the specification.

Differences between unit specifications were significant at the $p < 0.05$ level for all aspects of the specification.

We can see from this that the nationally devised Communication unit specification received the poorest overall rating, while the nationally devised Accounting and Engineering units were relatively well regarded. We would speculate that the nature of these subjects has much to do with this difference, with Accounting and Engineering being comparatively substantive subject areas in which outcomes and content are easier to define than in a subject like Communication.

We also asked a series of questions to discover whether subject specialists felt that the various components of a specification should be defined in advance, or whether there were areas which they felt were better left to the discretion of the staff in colleges. The results are shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Pre-defined and discretionary elements of a unit

Which elements of a unit should be defined in advance in the specifications, and which should be left to the discretion of the college?

	Define in advance (%)	Leave to college (%)
The definition of the competences (N=185)	93	7
The context in which competences are taught (N=182)	51	49
The content of the teaching (N=182)	24	76
The teaching methods to be used (N=181)	3	97
The level of attainment required to pass (N=184)	84	16
The level of attainment required for merit (N=185)	83	17
The assessment instruments which should be used (N=182)	43	57

Clear majorities of the respondents thought it appropriate for the outcomes to be defined in advance, and for the levels of attainment for pass and merit awards to be given. Most preferred that teaching methods and content of teaching be left to the colleges, and there was a reasonably even division of opinion about whether assessment instruments and the context of the teaching should be specified. Respondents were not asked to support their views and we can only speculate that the basis of these opinions is that lecturers, whilst they are happy to take responsibility for deciding the detail of what should be taught and how it should be delivered, want units to have national currency and are therefore in favour of specifying those components which most closely define the 'standard' required.

There were no statistically significant differences between subject areas in these preferences, but there was an interesting and statistically significant difference between staff in further education colleges and those in central institutions. FE college staff were more inclined to want both the competences and the assessment instruments to be defined in advance, while CI staff showed a greater tendency to want these to be left to the discretion of the colleges. Presumably this reflects the greater historical reliance on nationally developed courses in FE colleges and the greater familiarity of those staff with the National Certificate modules.



Discussion

It will be clear that the extent to which a unit specification is adequate will only be decided once it is actually being used. Indeed there is some

evidence to suggest that the way in which it is used may be as important as its content in determining the quality of assessment which it supports (Black, Hall, Martin and Yates, 1989). These data are insufficient in themselves to offer an insight into such matters.

Nevertheless, it would seem from our findings that there is a reasonable degree of staff satisfaction with ACDP unit specifications in most respects, with the probable exceptions of the specification of performance criteria and uncertainty about assessment methods (Table 3.2). The former underlines our finding from the previous section that 'competence' is proving to cause difficulties, at least at this stage of the development, for some staff. The latter is interesting because, unlike the National Certificate module descriptors, it is an area not covered by HN Unit specifications, but is clearly one on which at least some staff would welcome greater support.

If there is a more general criticism it concerns the allegedly artificial and obscure use of language in some specifications. We suspect, however, that this may have few long-term effects for two reasons: staff will become more experienced in dealing with specifications and will assimilate the language; and those who write the specifications will similarly gain in experience through time. Provided, therefore, that there is a suitable programme of review of specifications, then these linguistic problems should be alleviated.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

One of the most visible effects of the ACDP has been the move away from externally set and marked end-of-year examinations towards college-devised assessments. The basis on which assessments are made has changed from a norm-referenced system to a criterion-referenced system built around statements of competence defined in outcomes. Assessment is also expected to take on a more diagnostic role and to function as an aid to teaching and learning.

■ Insights from the college questionnaires

Our first question concerned the extent to which various broad approaches to assessment were used on the case study courses. We know from interviews with course leaders and senior managers that nine out of the twenty-eight courses we looked at retained some element of end-testing, but in our college questionnaires we also asked staff who were teaching on these courses to give an estimate of the extent to which they used four broad approaches to assessment: end-of-course assessments; end-of-unit assessments; continuous assessment; and assessment for formative or diagnostic purposes. It is, of course, not the case that all previous courses were assessed entirely by end examinations, nor is some form of end examination entirely unknown amongst courses developed through the ACDP. Mixtures of different types of assessment have always existed. We, however, were interested in discovering if staff reported any general trends in their approaches to assessment. The results are shown in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5 Types of assessment used in HN Units*To what extent do you use the following types of assessment in HN Units?*

	To a large extent %	Part of the time %	Only very seldom %	Not at all %
End of unit assessment (N=70)	37	26	11	26
End of course assessment (N=67)	12	18	7	63
Formative / diagnostic assessment (N=65)	31	37	18	14
Continuous summative assessment (N=69)	65	26	2	7

We can see that assessment at the end of the course was not used by 63% of teachers, and that some use of continuous assessment is now an almost universal feature of these courses. It is also apparent that staff are reporting a fairly widespread use of formative or diagnostic assessment. In response to another question about the changes brought about by the ACDP, 35% claimed that they were now using formative or diagnostic assessment more than they had before (see Table 3.6). There was a statistically significant difference between subject areas in the responses to this question, with those staff teaching in 'Management' showing a greater increase in the use of assessment for these purposes than others.

Table 3.6 Change in use of diagnostic assessment*Do you use the following teaching methods or techniques more, or less, than you did prior to the introduction of the HN Units?*

	Use more now %	Use the same now %	Use less now %	Never used %
Using diagnostic assessment to help identify students strengths and weaknesses (N=55)	35	40	7	18

That the substantial use of continuous assessment has increased for many lecturers is apparent from Table 3.7 in which 54% of respondents claim that its use has increased 'To a large extent'. Once again there were statistically significant differences between subject areas, with many more Computing and Engineering staff noting a large increase in the use of continuous assessment for summative purposes (76% and 67% respectively). This increase in computing is surprising in that there was already a large element of continuous assessment before the ACDP.

Table 3.7 Use of continuous assessment*Has your use of continuous assessment as a form of summative assessment increased or decreased in courses made up of HN Units?*

Increased to a large extent %	Increased to some extent %	No change %	Decreased to some extent %	Decreased to a large extent %
54	28	16	1	1

The quantitative evidence therefore suggests that introducing the HN courses has been associated with a trend away from end examinations and towards increasing use of formative and diagnostic assessment and continuous assessment. However, as we have noted above, not all subject areas are experiencing change at the same rate, or in the same ways.

Finally, before we leave the quantitative data and turn to see what was said in interview, it is worth noting college staff's initial, and somewhat negative, perception of the effects that these changes in assessment have had on higher education and training (Table 3.8, below). There were no significant differences between either colleges or subject areas in these responses. It can be assumed, therefore, that this is a fairly general pattern of perceptions amongst college staff. We have no comparable evidence on the perceptions of students or employers. The reasons behind this negative staff perception become apparent from the interview data.

Table 3.8 *Change in aspects of higher education since the introduction of HN Units (assessment)*

Do you think that the following aspects of higher education have improved or deteriorated since the introduction of HN Units?

	Improved %	Deteriorated %	No change %	Don't know %
The assessment system (N=56)	30	54	9	7
Standards of attainment (N=55)	18	57	16	9

Insights from the interviews

In the interviews with course leaders and senior managers twenty out of thirty three confirmed that, in their view, assessment had changed greatly, while thirty one said that continuous assessment was used much more than on pre-ACDP courses.

Respondents claimed that a number of quite definite benefits had followed from this. In particular it was felt that assessment was now much more closely focused, that the range of assessment methods available was now wider and, most importantly, that all relevant parts of the course now had to be assessed. This '100% coverage' of assessment was contrasted with the limitations of examination systems in which candidates were allowed to choose to answer questions on only part of the syllabus they had covered.

... As soon as that simple idea came across, that a criteria [sic] is something that you have got to have visibly and evidentially have tested - has the student passed that criteria? - then the design of assessments improved almost overnight.

That is the main selling point of the system, that you've got to assess every part of it, and that's where it's streets ahead of an examination, because you can't in a three hour examination examine all the things that have been covered.

However, while coverage of all the relevant outcomes was seen as a benefit, there remained some doubts about other effects. A common worry was that, because students were no longer faced with the task of revising their work for exams, they would tend to compartmentalise all that they had learned, and their long term retention would suffer. End examinations were at least seen by staff to have had the advantage of encouraging a certain amount of reinforcement of previous learning, which some staff felt was lost with the greater emphasis on continuous assessment.

Some staff feel that, because we've finished with [a topic] that the student just switches off, whereas the benefit - the so-called benefit - of the big bang exam is the student then revised for the big exam, say in June, and [that topic] came back again.

One of my criticisms of the ... system is that all the assessment does is that it proves that the student could do it at the time. And it gets back to the idea that we need, to some extent, to be testing long term memory, testing deep understanding, testing underlying concepts.

Because of this feeling some staff still felt the need for a greater element of end examination retained in the system, even when they admitted the benefits of continuous assessment.

The questionnaire data suggested that a large number of teachers were concerned about the maintenance of 'standards' using the ACDP model and some insights into the reasons behind this emerge from interviews. Amongst these were assertions that: because frequent re-assessments are available some students may come to feel that they need not make an effort to 'pass', and staff may come to feel that there is pressure on them to 'pass' students; the division of assessment into discrete outcomes was felt by some to make it 'easier' and to reduce the need for the students to make a 'larger' effort; the nature of competence-based assessment was felt to encourage a 'minimum competence' approach which, by seeming to remove the danger of failure, did not encourage students to attain any more than the necessary minimum:

[students] are accustomed to the idea that if they fail the first time round there'll be another very similar exam in a few weeks, so it doesn't really matter and they'll pass. So I think they've become quite conscious that there's a pressure on us to pass them and that is leaving people like me in a lot of difficulty.

Despite these worries the notion of taking responsibility for assessment away from a central body and giving it to college staff was generally welcomed. Out of thirty-three interviewees, fourteen were entirely welcoming of this move, thirteen saw a mixture of benefits and drawbacks (mostly concerning increased workload), and only four expressed unmixed negative views (three interviewees did not respond).

[responsibility] I think that's just a natural thing at this college. I'd be surprised if anyone in this college, even amongst ... some of my more traditional colleagues ... would really object to that.

However, the major drawback which teaching staff saw in the devolution of this responsibility to the colleges lay in the increased workload, both in

conducting assessments and administering the system, which they faced. Twenty one out of the thirty three interviewees made an adverse comment on this.

The disadvantage is the inordinate amount of assessment that has to be done.

I think the people who have actually been at the sharp end are beginning to feel extremely shell-shocked because they're having to deal with an enormous amount of assessment.

That's maybe one of the biggest criticisms of this system that so much time is spent on assessment ... say a couple of hours a week on assessment of one outcome and then you go on to the next one.

Several interviewees also claimed that the assessment load was also too great on students. Since many of these courses are still in their first or second year, and it will be the first time that students will have been taken through the system, some of these problems may well lessen as courses settle down and assessment timetables are adjusted to avoid bottlenecks. However, a more profound difficulty may be that for some staff the complaint was not about the 'normal' assessment, but about the 'necessity' of re-assessment of those students who had failed to attain outcomes:

... it's more the marking and the revision you have to give them, the remedial ... I don't think there's any staff complained about giving the assessment, it's the extra time that the remedial takes up.

Whilst the opportunity for remediation and re-assessment is meant to assist students who are having problems, it was, in the view of some of the staff interviewed, these very students who suffered most from the system:

... with the continuous assessment we have to continue to assess them as we are teaching them ... the weaker students have a bigger and bigger load building up on them because they're having to do the assessments again and again. So, in fact, it's attacking the weaker students more than the stronger ones who will get through the assessment and then go on to the next one and the next one.



Discussion

There are some interesting dichotomies in these findings. Staff have clearly moved towards continuous assessment, and appreciate its advantages, but also have reservations about the danger of 'compartmentalising' student learning; many lecturers have come to use assessment for formative or diagnostic purposes, but some have associated this with a need for 're-assessment' which they see as placing strain on both staff and students. But perhaps the biggest contrast is between staff claims that 'standards' are threatened by the ACDP alongside an even stronger claim that the colleges have welcomed the opportunity to take greater responsibility for assessment because it gives staff a greater sense of ownership.

Some of these findings have an interesting commonality with our findings on staff perceptions in the early stages of implementation of the National Certificate (Black, Hall and Yates, 1988). College staff in that

study were equally hesitant about several details of the model they were being asked to adopt but, like staff in this study, they welcomed the change in principle and rejected the option of reverting to the system it had replaced. It may well be that we are beginning to see the emergence of a pattern of staff perceptions on the acceptability of moving from 'norm-referenced', 'general attainment' models of assessment towards 'criterion-referenced', 'competence-based' approaches. Our hypothesis would be that there are three stages: initial enthusiasm for the basic principles prior to implementation because of the perceived educational benefits; mixed reactions when staff face up to the realities of implementation; and, finally, systemic adaptation as the 'new' system becomes the status quo and staff begin to develop experience, understanding and confidence to deal with their problems.

The staff we worked with in this study are clearly in the second of these categories and there was little in our data to suggest that most will not progress eventually onto the third. However, it also seems to us that the extent to which the transition will be comfortable, rapid and voluntary depends on the managers of change beginning to take account of the problems encountered in the early days of implementation which persist even as most staff move on to the final stage of adaptation. Comparison of our reports on the National Certificate in 1988, 1989 and 1991 (Black et al) suggest that some persistent problems exist in that context which are also problems arising initially in relation to the HN courses. We will identify three of these below.

First, there has been a continuing perception amongst staff teaching National Certificate programmes that the extent to which 'standards' are maintained should be a cause for concern. This is strongly associated with matters of 'quality assurance' which we discuss below but it is clear from these data that staff implementing HN courses have similar concerns. If it is the case that 'standards' in terms of inter-institutional comparability and inter-rater reliability are *not* suffering then staff must be given the confidence that they clearly lack. If teaching staff are, in fact, correct in their worries then something must be done about it before the system loses its credibility.

Second, there are persistent claims from staff that the implementation of summative procedures in criterion-referenced, competence-based systems leads to bureaucratic demands which are excessive. Form-filling is not the best use of teachers' time and the extent of the persistence of these claims must give them some validity. Models of good practice, including those based on computers, would seem to be needed, along with a willingness amongst college managers and in SCOTVEC to look seriously at whether this is an inevitable consequence of gathering the information these assessment procedures can provide or an area in which better management might reduce the pressure.

Finally, there are repeated claims that these assessment models lead to too much time being spent on assessment and too little on teaching. In our opinion it is disappointing that a number of respondents felt that the 'remediation' procedure associated with formative or diagnostic

assessment fell into this category. Even worse were their claims that this disadvantaged weaker students because they 'fell behind' - a clear indication that 'student-centred', in their estimation, does not include progressing at a pace to suit the individual. With that said, there clearly is a problem to address.

Our National Certificate studies have indicated that one way of relieving the strain is to allocate curriculum time in longer rather than smaller 'blocks', each containing several modules which are integrated in their delivery. This allows more time for students to work at their own pace, or to exit with different achievements. Whether this would be of value in HN courses is open to speculation but might be worthy of exploration.

However, perhaps more widely useful would be to encourage debate about the nature of the evidence which staff need to consider when deciding if a student is competent or not. In a model where students have multiple opportunities to display competence there may not be the need, which some lecturers clearly thought to be the case, to repeat the whole assessment process each time. If the teacher is confident that the student has shown mastery of components A, B, and D of a competence, but not component C, why assess A, B, C and D repeatedly? If C looks as if it is a potentially questionable attainment, why not look in considerable depth at a student's mastery of it, both for diagnostic purposes and to make a *confident* assessment? This 'assessment' or 'evidence' gap model, which arises from work conducted by the Employment Department in the development of their 'standards' programme leading to the implementation of awards accredited by NCVQ, may have interesting potential in helping teachers to cope with what is clearly a persistent difficulty.

3.4 MERIT

Awarding a pass with merit is one of the features of HN Units which distinguish them from National Certificate modules. In the course of the ACDP so far, several ways of defining the criteria for a merit award have been suggested. SCOTVEC's own guidance note on the award of merit suggests that it may be based on: speed of task completion; approach or attitude; transferability of skills; error rate; or demonstration of skills to a higher order. Other techniques have also been used in some of the pilot courses and it was on the basis of experience with the pilot courses and the drafting of the first group of nationally developed unit specifications that the guidance note was formulated. We were therefore interested in finding out the extent to which these approaches were being used and what staff thought about making merit awards.



Insights from college and subject questionnaires

In the college questionnaire, respondents were offered a range of ways in which merit might be defined and asked to say which they used. The results are shown in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9 Bases used to distinguish between a pass and a merit

Which of the following bases are used to distinguish between a pass and a merit?

demonstrating superior performance in the competence outcomes (N=71)	75
demonstrating innovative use of the competences (N=71)	39
satisfactory performance in additional merit outcomes (N=71)	37
a higher pass mark for a combined terminal assessment (N=71)	13
performance which is significantly better than other students in the class (N=71)	37
attainment of all outcomes at the first attempt (N=71)	30
attainment of all outcomes at a faster or more efficient rate than is expected (N=70)	9

All figures are percentages

Very little use appears to be made of defining merit as 'faster or more efficient' attainment of outcomes, and it is to be expected that the use of a 'higher pass mark for a combined terminal assessment' will diminish as those pilot courses which still use such assessments are modified for re-validation.

There were some significant differences between subject areas. Accounting and Computing used the 'additional outcomes' approach significantly more than other subjects. Since SCOTVEC's guidance note now cautions that the definition of merit 'should not introduce a new outcome which is outwith the General Unit Competence and possibly encompassed in some other unit', it may be that this approach will have to be changed in the future. It was also noticeable that staff teaching Management units made much more use of 'innovative use of the competences' as a basis for awarding merit than any other subject area.

The commonest approach, however, is that which defines merit as a 'superior' performance in the same outcomes as are assessed for a straightforward pass. This begs a few questions about how 'superior' is defined, and we shall see later in this section that this caused some of our respondents difficulties. It is also worth noting that 37% of respondents based the award of merit on 'performance which is significantly better than other students in the class', which is basically a norm-referenced approach being used in the context of a supposedly criterion-referenced system.

We can see from Table 3.10 below that the substantial majority of staff who completed this questionnaire were in favour of the principle of having a merit award, although rather more of them wished for an overall course merit award than agreed with the present system of merit awards for individual units.

Table 3.10 *Staff agreeing with the awarding of merit for either individual units or overall course awards*

	Yes	No
Individual units (N=73)	69	31
Overall Course award (N=70)	80	20

Respondents were also asked how easy or difficult they found it to determine whether a student deserves a merit award. The results are shown in Table 3.11.

Table 3.11 *Ease of determining merit*

How easy or difficult do you find it to determine whether or not a student deserves a merit award for each unit?

Very easy %	Easy %	Difficult %	Very difficult %
10	37	40	13

(N=70)

There was a fairly even split between those who found merit decisions easy and those who found them difficult. We found no significant difference between the responses from those teaching on courses which still made use of examinations and those which did not.

In the 'subject' questionnaire we also asked respondents to say how easy they would find it to make merit decisions on the basis of the information given in the specification and, interestingly, a different picture emerged, (Table 3.12).

Table 3.12 *Ease of distinguishing merit from pass*

How easy do you think it would be to distinguish between a pass and a merit award, given the merit outcomes and criteria stated in this unit specification?

Very easy %			Not at all easy %
1	2	3	4
13	17	24	46

(N=185)

There was some variation between subjects, with one locally devised (Communication) unit judged as being a relatively easy unit in which to make merit decisions. In general, however, it would seem that college staff are generally in favour of the principle of having some form of merit award; that, in practice, around half of them find some difficulty in

making decisions about merit awards; and that a majority of them find that the definitions of merit contained in the merit outcomes and criteria are difficult to interpret.



Insights from the interviews

The overall findings from the questionnaire studies were that a majority of staff welcomed the principle of making merit awards but some doubt was cast on the difficulty of the task in practice. The interview data also suggest that, while only a minority were against the principle of making merit awards, many lecturers are encountering difficulties as they move from policy to practice.

Of those interviewees who commented on merit in the HN Units only four had unmixed positive views on it; six expressed a mixture of positive and negative views; and nineteen had only negative comments to make. These nineteen divided into those whose views were based on 'philosophical' misgivings about the place of merit awards in a competence based system (thirteen respondents) and those who were concerned about the operational difficulties of implementing merit awards (fourteen respondents). Eight respondents gave both reasons for their doubts. Furthermore, when asked whether they thought that the staff on their courses found it easy or difficult to make merit decisions in practice, they tended to agree with the views of respondents to our 'subject' questionnaire. Seventeen thought that they found it difficult, six said that there were few practical problems, and three gave a mixed response. In general, then, these course leaders and senior managers did not give a very encouraging view of merit in practice.

There were several reasons given by those who were in favour of merit awards in HN Units. Amongst these were the view that employers wanted some indication of different levels of ability, and the assertion that previous experience with National Certificate modules had shown the drawbacks of not having some form of differentiation. There was also a view that students do differ in their attainments, however difficult it may be to define those differences. Such respondents were less concerned with the practical difficulties of implementing merit awards and more concerned to reflect what they saw as the realities of students' abilities and employers' demands:

In terms of SCOTVEC modules, one of the criticisms from employers and industry and commerce that I had was that there was no indication of level, that you had either passed or failed, and they wanted to know more than that ... a merit award is a step forward.

A large group of respondents, however, found great difficulty in accepting that merit awards have a place in a competence based system. It was not that these respondents did not believe that students differ in their abilities and attainments, rather that they could not see how they could consistently judge one group of students to be 'competent' and another to be something more than competent.

... the whole merit thing causes a lot of problems with me. First of all, if it's supposed to be competence, you're either competent or you're not competent. So that is - there's really no reason for merit.

The idea of merit was always a problem ... merit's a norm-referencing concept ... now, I don't care how they argue it, there's no concept of merit in a criterion referenced system but SCOTVEC are imposing it.

These views appear to pre-suppose a model of criterion-referenced assessment such as is used in the National Certificate. This is not the only possible model, and we shall have more to say about this later.

The problem of defining merit in a clear and unambiguous way was raised by several respondents. For some this was primarily a problem of the language used in merit statements, which was sometimes dismissed as 'jargon', was often found to be difficult to interpret, and was thought to have little clear meaning attached to it:

I think the students have to understand clearly what they have to do to achieve a pass or a merit pass, and the courses we have just now, there is no dubiety, it's clear cut and they know what they have to achieve. On the new course if we say that the criteria is 'in a more advanced way', or whatever the jargon happens to be, how do you quantify that?

The operational difficulties of making merit decisions in HN Units, and their perceived reliance on the judgement of the lecturer, tended to be contrasted with what some respondents saw as the relative ease with which such judgements could be made in a traditional marking system.

'Marking' seemed to be seen by some of these staff as a comparatively 'honest' way of expressing comparisons between students. In contrast, and by implication, merit criteria were thought of as a 'dishonest' way of doing the same thing.

The belief among some respondents was that the procedures for making merit awards were still seen by some staff in SCOTVEC as experimental. This was certainly the view of one course leader of a Phase 2 pilot course:

It seems to be a bit of a hotch-potch at the minute. I think SCOTVEC are looking for guidance on it! Because when we asked them they said 'Well, if you let us know'.

Of course, pilot implementation of HNUs is intended to identify difficulties and find ways of circumventing them. But the importance of establishing sound, generalisable procedures was underlined by one respondent:

One of the things that worries me is quality assurance across the system, because we could probably run quite rigorous criteria for merit here, whereas they might be doling them out with the cornflakes in some other college.



Discussion

It would appear from these data that, despite the 'philosophical' difficulties cited by several of those interviewed, a majority of staff is in favour of the

principle of merit awards for HNUs. It would also seem that many staff involved in this study were having difficulty implementing their policy. Should we be surprised by these findings?

As evaluators we were not surprised that a majority of staff favoured this approach. Our earlier work on *Assessment in the National Certificate* (Black, Hall and Martin 1991) strongly suggested that the absence of ways of distinguishing amongst students' attainments was a source of frustration for many staff. However, while we were not surprised by the majority view, we were not entirely convinced by some of the 'philosophical' positions taken by those antagonistic towards the principle. In particular we would have to take issue with the argument that merit awards cannot be associated with a competence based approach because this is not permissible in a criterion-referenced approach to assessment. In fact, there is no particular reason why mastery of a criterion need be dichotomous. Even in the context of the much cited driving test, 'merit' criteria have to be met if you want to drive a vehicle over a certain size. Typing awards at various levels are distinguished by increasingly demanding speed and accuracy criteria. Standard Grade awards at school describe mastery of criteria at six levels, many criteria running across all six. In short, existing practice in several areas shows that 'competence' is defined at a number of levels without undue difficulty.

What might be surprising is the extent to which merit appears to be difficult to apply in practice. We do not think this is inevitable. We can quite understand why SCOTVEC allowed – and perhaps encouraged – a variety of ways of implementing it in the early stages of the ACDP. If this reflects a willingness to learn from experience in the field then it must be good practice. However, there is now an urgent need for absolute clarity about what distinguishes a merit award, and perhaps each specification could contain further guidance on possible approaches to making merit decisions. This clarity should allow students and staff to understand what the student has to be able to do to deserve the award and should eclipse any latent tendencies to norm referencing and naive aspirations towards solutions in 'marking'. Without this clarity merit problems could persist for some considerable time.

3.5 QUALITY ASSURANCE

In 1989 SCOTVEC issued a consultative document on quality assurance in which they set out their plans for increasing devolution of responsibility for quality assurance to colleges, subject to audit. This was followed in May 1991 by a policy paper on their *Quality Development Programme* which presented a framework for the development of quality assurance systems. In this framework they defined the elements of quality assurance as the *validation of awards*, *approval of centres* and the *verification of assessment*. This section will concentrate mainly on the last of these - verification of assessment - as it was at the time of the field work for this research (Spring 1991). It will focus on internal systems in institutions and on the national system, and principally as it operated through external course assessors.

Internal quality assurance

It is a condition of approval for all centres presenting SCOTVEC advanced courses that they should have an internal system of quality assurance. All of the colleges which we visited had such systems in operation and all conformed to roughly similar patterns. One of our respondents described the system as it operated in his college:

Internally we have two bodies which are responsible for overseeing the course ... The job [of the first] really is to look at assessments, to handle problems associated with student appeals ... they are also the first filter on proposed assessments, in other words what, in old-fashioned terms, we called a moderating committee ... the second level is the course committee. That's a more generalised approach ... above that it gradually gets more diffuse as we report upwards, ultimately to the academic board.

The staff we interviewed had relatively little to say about the workings of internal quality assurance. For most, it seemed to be a system which they knew and understood and were happy to work with. The one doubt which was raised came from the data from the college questionnaire. In this questionnaire staff were asked if there was an internal quality assurance system in their college. Sixteen per cent of the respondents replied that there was not. Since we know that there was such a system in all these colleges, the question arises as to why it should be that these staff do not know about it. Since the interviewees tended to be promoted staff with special responsibilities for the advanced courses, while the questionnaires were completed by a larger proportion of non-promoted staff (62% below senior lecturer level), the suspicion arises that some of these systems are seen as primarily administrative arrangements and do not directly impinge on the day to day work of some ordinary lecturing staff. Interestingly, a quarter of those responding to the college questionnaire felt that they had not been given sufficient advice or guidance on quality assurance and the problem was significantly greater in the FE colleges than in the CIs.

It was also the case that in all of these colleges students had an input into this system through having student representatives on course committees. In at least one case student involvement extended to them each being asked to complete a course evaluation form and give their comments on the course. These comments were then sifted through jointly by the course leader and the student representative and presented to the course committee. We were not, however, in a position to pursue the issue of student involvement in quality assurance in any greater depth.

National quality assurance: external course assessors

In the college questionnaire, respondents were asked for their views on aspects of the system of external course assessment (see Table 3.13).

Table 3.13 Satisfaction with external course assessment

To what extent are you satisfied with the following aspects of the system of external course assessment?

	Satisfied to a large extent %	Partially satisfied %	Satisfied to a limited extent %	Not at all satisfied %	Don't know %
a pre-determined national standard exists for each unit (N=70)	7	16	16	44	17
the standards applied in other departments / colleges are similar to those in your own (N=71)	13	13	14	28	32
the monitoring of assessment provided by ECAs is adequate to maintain standards (N=72)	36	18	19	17	10
<i>(if consortium developed course)</i>					
the standards applied in other depts / colleges in the consortium are similar to those in your own (N=38)	11	16	8	18	47

We can see from Table 3.13 that the monitoring provided by external courses assessors is viewed relatively favourably by these respondents, although there remains a significant proportion of staff who are dissatisfied. We shall see later that this mixed response is reflected in the views of those we interviewed.

However, responses to the other three questions give greater cause for concern. A large proportion of these respondents were either not satisfied, or simply did not know, if standards have actually been established for the units they are teaching. This was particularly the case with staff teaching Computing who were significantly more dissatisfied than staff in other areas. In theory, this is the sort of information which should be established by the statement of outcomes and criteria in the unit specifications (see section 3.2). Nor were the majority of teaching staff convinced that standards applied in other colleges or departments are similar to their own. Although the level of dissatisfaction is lower amongst staff involved in consortium developed courses, it is a little surprising to find that more of these staff say that they 'don't know' about the standards being applied elsewhere.

In the interviews with course leaders and senior staff a similar mixture of views was apparent with fourteen respondents expressing mainly positive views about quality assurance, ten giving mixed responses and five being mainly negative. Interestingly, four out of the five mainly

negative responses came from staff in FE colleges. The 'mixed' and 'mainly positive' responses came roughly equally from CI and FE staff.

The sort of worries which staff expressed concerned the maintenance of national standards and comparability of standards between colleges. Some staff appeared to have little confidence that the system could ensure these.

My ... worry is that we're all doing this on our own ... I don't know if the standard throughout the country is going to be even at all.

Is there a national policy? I don't know. I could be using standards in this college which are far higher than others, or indeed far lower.

Despite these worries in some quarters it was apparent throughout the interviews that individual external course assessors tended to be well regarded, thus confirming the perception of respondents to the college questionnaire. Not only were they respected as academic peers, but they had also been useful sources of advice and guidance.

I think there is a national standard ... I think if there was a drastic difference in standards, I'm sure these people [ECAs] would pick it up very quickly.

... there's a more personal relationship with the external assessor ... it's personal in the sense that the assessor is visiting the college, represented on the committee, and we've found ours very amenable to giving advice, guidance, and support ... we've found our external assessors very helpful if we want to sound out ideas.

Overall, thirteen of those interviewed expressed positive views about the role of the external course assessors, sixteen had mixed views and only two had almost entirely negative views. However, one respondent pointed out that he thought that ECAs were extremely important but were being asked to perform an almost impossible task:

I think external examiners or external assessors are very important from the viewpoint of maintaining parity of level of achievement of students in any institution anywhere. The working relationships we have had with our external course assessors have been excellent ... if you tell an assessor that he has two (sic) days a year in any one institution, and you ask him to moderate all the assessment used as part of the course as described in competence terms, you've actually described a wholly ludicrous position ... I think that the system as it stands as I understand from the SCOTVEC perspective is unworkable for assessors. They can't do the job that SCOTVEC wants them to do ...

And, indeed, if we look at the list of duties which SCOTVEC expects its external course assessors to perform (Table 3.14), we can see that they have no easy task, although visits are now expected to occur three times per session.

Table 3.14 The duties of SCOTVEC external course assessors

The duties of the external course assessor will include:

1. approval of assessment instruments for each unit of the course in accordance with the approved course document;
2. monitoring (using appropriate sampling methods if necessary) the internal assessments of the units, including, for example, the operation and marking of assessments;
3. visiting each Centre regularly (normally 3 times a session*) for the purpose of discussion with staff on implementation of assessment strategy and participation in the review of Centre results;
4. formally confirming, on behalf of SCOTVEC, results on a unit-by-unit basis and the group awards;
5. disseminating best practices on all aspects of assessment;
6. preparing reports after each visit as a contribution to the Centre's internal monitoring of the course;
7. preparing an annual report on the assessment of the course as a contribution to the Centre's internal monitoring of the course;
8. preparing any other reports which may be requested by SCOTVEC;
9. participating in the Council's induction sessions for External Course Assessors;
10. participating in additional training programmes as appropriate.

(Source: SCOTVEC Form EA3, *Information for SCOTVEC External Course Assessors*)

*Changed from twice per session in Summer 1990

Because of the heavy demands made on part-time ECAs, several respondents called for more resources to be put into the system if it was to work successfully. One went as far as to say that there should be full-time assessors:

Quality control on a national view is a nonsense and needs to be tightened up. I would put money into employing full time external course assessors, and scrap this idea of people who do it as a sideline to their normal job.

Few respondents went this far, but there was a common feeling evident that while the efforts of external course assessors were appreciated, they were hampered by the system within which they worked. Our respondents were not convinced that there was sufficient opportunity for external course assessors to meet together to compare experiences, despite the training and up-dating sessions which SCOTVEC organised for them. This was occasionally contrasted, either with an ideal situation in which external course assessors would work together in teams, or with the situation on previous courses where there were regular examiners' meetings. Whilst the majority of external course assessors hold more than

one appointment the problems – indeed the dangers – of having an external course assessor responsible for only one course, and consequently limited in his or her experience of what was happening elsewhere, were apparent.

... it would be very beneficial for an external course assessor to be linked with two, three or four colleges so that the standards could be set. I think that's the way forward, just the same as if you've got module subject assessors - they're not linked to one college, they're linked to an area and therefore you can establish levels.

I am not aware of SCOTVEC trying to recall the ... ECAs to sit down and say 'Look, what is going on here?' ... the assessors on the old course met regularly five times a year ... we know that [the old course] had a recognised national standard. I don't think that this new course does ... I worry about the national standard of this ... I don't think that there is a mechanism to maintain national quality.

It was interesting to note that some of our respondents, who were themselves external course assessors, shared these concerns although those who were lucky enough to have their own informal network seemed to feel more comfortable with the system:

... my feeling at the present moment is that it needs a lot of edges worn down ... I think it's working quite well, there's nothing wrong with it. Particularly a person like myself, who's a course assessor for two, and my own, so I can compare all three and hopefully come up with a reasonable approach and then ... our course assessor gives me his input so between us we've got almost four colleges doing the same thing.

There was also an apparent difference between those who saw their task as moderating individual assessments and those who, as in the quotation below, saw the work of an external course assessor in terms of ensuring that the college had adequate systems to moderate their own systems:

The college has to set up its own internal system and SCOTVEC have the ECA system to try to ensure that the quality systems within the college are operating. That's to me trying to put in a nutshell what the ECA is doing, the key function he has ... [as an ECA myself] what I'm more concerned about is the actual systems that exist within the college to try to ensure that the quality standards are being met.

We suspect that this last view of the role of external course assessors may be nearer to the role which SCOTVEC envisages for them, and may become more important as responsibility for quality assurance is increasingly devolved to colleges, but it is worth noting that this divergence of opinion exists even amongst external course assessors themselves. It may be that there is some ambiguity in the meaning of SCOTVEC's instruction to ECAs that their duties include 'approval of assessment instruments' and 'monitoring' of the 'operation' and 'marking' of assessments. Certainly if this is taken absolutely literally then the external course assessors face a very large task.



Discussion

What is apparent from these findings is that there is a reasonable base of support for the system of quality assurance as operated through the external course assessors. Certainly individual external course assessors have the confidence of those with whom they work. Where there is need for more reassurance is in the general perception which staff have of the system as a whole. There remain doubts about whether it will be effective in maintaining parity of standards between institutions. This general pattern of responses is in line with the findings from the questionnaire to teaching staff where it was found that more staff simply 'don't know' whether such parity of standards exists than were actively dissatisfied about it. It is also clear that the fact that they don't know worries a significant proportion of staff. Again, the need is to reassure staff and so provide confidence in the system within which they are operating.

4 The system in practice: articulation and teaching

Up till this point in the report we have focused on the developmental process and on individuals' views on key parts of the system. We were also able to ask staff who had actually begun to deliver the new HN Units and Courses what their experience was in practice. As part of these insights, in this final substantive section we will offer our findings on how articulation worked in practice and what changes introducing the new courses had brought to teaching.

4.1 ARTICULATION

We have already given examples, in section 2, of how the new advanced courses can be designed to articulate with degree courses. Similarly, since they are based on a philosophy and design which is very like that of the National Certificate, they might be expected to articulate with NC courses more easily than did the old HNCs and HNDs.

The notion of articulation and the provision of rational course structures was built into the ACDP from the start. Ideally, National Certificate courses, HNCs, HNDs and degree courses would all show a clear relationship to one another and allow progression through the system, whilst providing flexible entry and exit points for students. We were therefore interested in the perceptions of college staff of the success with which, in practice, the Higher National courses interfaced with National Certificate modules on the one hand and degree courses on the other.

✻ Insights from the college questionnaires

In the questionnaire for teaching staff in the case study colleges we asked how well staff thought that the National Certificate was preparing students for entry to Higher National courses (Table 4.1). Overall, a substantial majority of those who expressed an opinion were reasonably satisfied, although it is worth noting that one-third felt that they did not know.

Table 4.1 *National Certificate as preparation for entry to the new HNC/D courses*

From your experience, how well do you think that the National Certificate prepares students for entry to the new HNC/D courses?

	Very well %	Reasonably well %	Not at all well %	Don't know %
Overall N=75	8	36	23	33
Teach NC N=30	13	50	24	13
Don't teach NC N=45	4	27	22	47

A roughly similar overall picture emerged when staff were asked about the value of the new HNC/Ds as a preparation for progression to degree courses. As Table 4.2 shows there was very little difference (and no statistical difference) in the responses from those who teach on degree courses and those who do not. At this stage this can only be an initial impression from our respondents. It would require a longitudinal study of student progression to verify or reject these impressions.

Table 4.2 *HNC/D courses as preparation for progression on to degree-level courses*

From your experience, how well do you think that the new HNC/D courses based on HN Units prepare students for progression on to degree level courses?

	Very well %	Reasonably well %	Not at all well %	Don't know %
Overall N=72	11	36	31	22
Teach degree N=31	13	32	29	26
Don't teach degree N=41	10	39	32	19

✠ Insights from the interviews

The staff interviewed in the case study colleges were able to give us details of twenty eight courses. Of these, only two courses had no National Certificate intake, and five had no upward route possible into a degree course. The nature of these links with other courses did, however, vary considerably. Ten took an intake from National Certificate courses run within the same college, and a further four had what they described as 'formal' links with courses in other colleges. The remainder may have had a tradition of accepting students from particular sources, but these were in no way formalised.

Of those courses which had some degree of formalised upward articulation, six fed into degree courses within the same institution and a further four described their links with other colleges as 'formal'. In other cases possibilities of upward progression existed but, once again, were not described as being by way of formal links.

Of the thirty three respondents who were interviewed, thirteen made positive comments on articulation between NC and HN courses, three had mixed views, and four were negative. On the articulation between HN courses and degrees nine were positive, four had mixed views and no-one had any negative views. In both areas, the remaining respondents felt that they had insufficient experience on which to base a comment.

As one might expect, those who were positive about the suitability of National Certificate qualifications as an entry to HN courses tended to have less to say than those who saw problems. The general picture which emerged from this group of respondents was that the National Certificate was a perfectly adequate preparation, provided that the students had completed suitable modules. It was very much a case of each applicant being considered on his or her merits:

[NC entrants fare] as well as any of the others, we don't have problems with them. It depends which National Certificates - any National Certificates? We take people with specific National Certificates. We'd prescribe which ones would be acceptable to us, but we would consider anybody really for an HNC, HND course. You're expecting the person to complete that course as your principle of admission ...

In contrast with this, those who saw problems tended to have more to say, and to say it in more detail. Some doubts were expressed about whether the National Certificate provided a suitably rigorous preparation for advanced courses, and there was still a perception that there was a big jump between the demands of National Certificate and the new HN courses.

... the failure rate of National Certificate students on the course ... is quite high ... the National Certificate tends to be continuous assessment with no reinforcement, and this is what we find is the big weakness of the National Certificate - there's no reinforcement.

However, there were relatively few comments of this sort and most courses, certainly where the National Certificate intake came from within the same college, seemed to find that it worked quite adequately.

Although there was widespread enthusiasm for the opportunities the ACDP offered for articulation, several problems which have to be faced in putting such a system into place were identified.

The first occurs at the stage of course design and validation. If the course is to provide a recognised qualification and offer possibilities of progression, it may be necessary to meet the competing requirements of several bodies. This can lead to sometimes time-consuming compromises:

the Engineering Council say that to get a corporate engineer, engineering award, you must have a project in your course. So we're having to give everybody in the second year a project. And then those who go into the BSc, CNAA say that you must have a project in your final year, so we're having to give them another project ... so the penalty we, the staff, are paying for trying to keep these two courses running together is that we're now having these hang of a lot of projects.

Providing multiple entry and exit points can also pose problems for those who are used to planning longer, more traditional, courses. Although the benefits for students were recognised, it nevertheless seemed to some respondents to be a difficult and unfamiliar way of structuring a course.

It's much easier to devise a degree course from scratch than it is to start with a two year HND ... because you've got to design it so that you've got an HNC at the end of the first year, an HND at the end of the second year, an ordinary degree at the end of the third year, and an honours degree at the end of the fourth year, which means that you've got to do a little bit of everything every year, typically, whereas often in a degree course ... you could leave subjects till the second year ... so it's actually quite constraining ... on the other hand, from the students' point of view, credit for work done, it's brilliant ...



Discussion

Overall, the facility for articulation which was intended to be a central feature of the ACDP would appear to have been seen as successful by most staff. As we showed in our case studies in part 2, the potential for articulation was the catalyst to collaboration between institutions; it also provided the structure for the development of vertical links amongst courses within colleges. If there is a clear problem it is that in some cases, more thought still needs to be given to finding ways to circumvent the problems of meeting the competing needs of different bodies. It cannot be good practice to repeat elements of courses or introduce additional requirements which are seen as interrupting the dynamic of good teaching. Minor obstacles like this can however be demotivating for staff and are best avoided if at all possible.

4.2 TEACHING

The validation checklist for SCOTVEC Advanced Courses, which was published as an annex to the ACDP Policy Paper (SCOTVEC, January 1990), states that 'student centred methods should be used whenever possible'. Unlike the documentation which accompanied the 'Action Plan' when the national Certificate was first introduced there is little other 'official' guidance on teaching methods. But, not least because one of the main reasons for the ACDP was the development of better articulation between NC programmes and advanced courses, we were interested in exploring whether teaching and learning methods appeared to be changing.



Insights from the college questionnaire

Staff in the case study colleges were given a list of teaching methods and asked to indicate which they used more or less in relation to those which they had used prior to the ACDP.

Table 4.3 *Change in teaching methods*

Do you use any of the following teaching methods or techniques more, or less, than you did prior to the introduction of the HNUnits?

	Use more now %	Use the same now %	Use less now %	Never used %
lecturing N=57	2	46	49	3
teacher teaching whole class together N=55	2	69	29	0
students working or discussing in groups N=56	55	27	7	11
students working through material at their own speed N=56	38	39	7	16
practical work N=53	47	45	4	4
projects or assignments N=56	59	29	7	5
using diagnostic assessment to help identify students' strengths and weakness N=55	35	40	7	18
role play N=55	27	25	2	46

It is clear that there has been a large swing towards student-centred ways of teaching and away from lecturing and teaching whole classes together. Further investigation showed that the largest change had occurred on Computing courses where two-thirds of the staff said that they used lectures less. In general, however, there were few significant differences between subjects or between different colleges.

We also asked staff whether they thought that teaching methods had improved with the introduction of HN courses and units. The results, shown in Table 4.4, indicate that twice as many staff thought that teaching methods had improved as thought that they had deteriorated, though there was more scepticism about the effect that this was having on student learning.

Table 4.4 *Aspects of higher education since the introduction of HN Units (teaching and learning)*

Do you think that the following aspects of higher education have improved or deteriorated since the introduction of HN Units?

	Improved %	Deteriorated %	No change %	Don't know %
methods of teaching N=54	44	20	28	11
ways that students go about learning N=56	34	44	11	11

There were no statistically significant differences between subjects or centres although staff teaching Management appeared to be the most positive, with nine out of twelve saying that teaching methods had improved. Nearly half of those concerned with Accounting courses thought that teaching methods had deteriorated. The views on student learning are interesting and are largely explained by the reservations which some staff have about competence-based systems and the ability of the assessment system to test for retention, both of which have already been discussed. It is, however, worth noting here the co-existence of an apparent welcome for changes in teaching with a worry that students are not approaching their learning as well as they had previously. We shall see later in this section that some respondents queried whether 'student-centred' methods were, in fact, appropriate for all students.

■ **Insights from the interviews**

The interviews with college staff confirmed that there had been a shift in teaching approaches because of the introduction of HN Units. However, they also suggested some variation in what these changes meant, uncovered a range of stances on their acceptability and identified a number of obstacles which those wishing to make changes had encountered.

■ **The meaning of student-centred learning**

A claim that teaching had shifted towards a more student-centred approach was more or less universal, but exactly what this implied varied

considerably. None of the respondents offered a 'textbook' definition, but many exemplified student-centred learning as involving a greater emphasis on teaching approaches such as group work, research work, discovery work, or the use of tutorials. Others tended to explain student-centred learning in terms of it not being 'lectures'. Indeed for some respondents the shift was seen as being so strong that, in cases where they still wanted to use lectures, they felt that they had to justify their use:

We try to be more student-centred I think ... I feel guilty now if I give a lecture. I try to give ... project work but there really is a lot to be learned best by the blackboard ...

Another interesting interpretation of student-centred learning saw it as synonymous with 'tutorials':

Yes it is more student-centred ... The student-centred parts come into the tutorials. In fact we're finding now that the lectures are simply a means of delivering the general ideas and we're now working on them much more in the tutorials.

In this interpretation, tutorials were seen to meet the student-centred requirement through giving students the opportunity to work in small groups. Perhaps tutorial work can be student-centred, but only if it starts with the individual needs of individual students. Clearly more detailed study of these approaches would be appropriate.

Finally it is worth noting that some staff claimed that they had little notion of what a shift to student-centred learning entailed other than a move away from lecturing. All they knew was that they were expected to implement the transition:

We've moved away from lectures to student-centred learning with absolutely no lecturer training, no staff development, no nothing. One year you're doing lectures, the next year you're doing something called student-centred learning, whatever that is.



Attitudes to change

Although in general there was a positive attitude to the changes which had taken place, the way in which it was perceived varied considerably. Perhaps at the most positive end of the spectrum were those who saw it as a gradual evolutionary process which had been hastened rather than caused by the introduction of the new advanced courses:

The teaching was changing, I would say. It's not been a revolution ... it's a gradual changeover where the people are getting used to competences ...

Also at this end of the spectrum was the view that, while the competences had been defined in advance, staff had been left to decide the means whereby the students were to achieve them. This was seen as a freedom to make the choice themselves and the opportunity to make teaching more interesting than was previously the case:

One of the positive features of it is that we are now allowed to teach a wider range of things than we did in the past ... now because you know from the specifications that's what you're supposed to be teaching, you can make sure that you teach in an interesting way.

There's a lot more freedom than there was to set them more exciting work to do. It tended in the past that the only interesting work that we could set for students was project work, now we can do more ...

For most respondents, however, while the changes were welcomed, there was an element of 'obligation' involved. This manifested itself in statements which sometimes over-stated an implication that they had little choice in the matter:

... there's no way that we can lecture now ... it's a different ball game now.

This 'obligation' stance is replaced at the other end of the spectrum not so much by open hostility as by claims that the new approaches which they were being asked to adopt were not always appropriate and that teaching methods should be chosen in accordance with the type of students being taught. That is, they considered that the approach was best determined by student needs rather than whatever teaching methods happened to be in vogue. Thus, for example, one respondent claimed that it is more appropriate to use lectures with degree students but totally inappropriate with National Certificate students. Some students were not felt to be able to take responsibility for their own learning:

Us encouraging them to think for themselves was initially interpreted by them as us abandoning them.

Student-centred learning - that presupposes that everyone who comes into the institution is anxious to learn. Very often they're not today ... that's the fault of educational theory ... it presumes the students want to learn. It isn't always true.



Obstacles to change

It is worth noting that several respondents identified features of their experience of delivering HN Units which made the use of student-centred methods more difficult than it might have been. In one case it was felt that the amount of content in the course was prohibitive:

I think staff generally would like to do more student-centred and it's causing a lot of frustration that they're being dragged back from it by the logistics of the course ... we're aware of what we would like to do but because of the overload ... they're running just to keep still and they can't really do it in a meaningful way.

Another respondent pointed out that student-centred learning brought its own problems because it tended to be associated with teaching methods which were time-consuming in themselves:

We're supposed to be doing student-centred learning. Well there's a limit to that. Student-centred learning is always much more time-consuming than traditional type methods so we try and give tutorial time, but it's difficult to get through the syllabus.

Finally, the numbers of students involved in some classes proved to be an additional constraint. Regardless of any desire to implement student-centred methods it was not always possible to do anything other than use lectures as the main form of delivery because of the large numbers of students in some groups.



Discussion

Our findings on teaching are seriously limited both by the methodology of our study and by its timing. To gain more than a superficial insight into the teaching which is taking place in advanced courses would require a study on its own and would involve data from students as well as work in classrooms. To obtain a rounded picture of teachers' experiences of delivering these courses would require data which was gathered after they had time to come to terms with the novelty of new curricula. The insights which we have offered here must therefore be considered in their proper context as no more than an early measure of the direction in which change is taking place.

Within that context it is quite striking that so many teachers felt that they were changing their style because of the introduction of the new HN Units and courses. The aspiration of change towards more student-centred approaches which was identified in the SCOTVEC literature at the beginning of this section is obviously being met, at least to some extent. What we do not know is how *much* change this does, and indeed should, involve. There is some evidence in schools (Black, Malcolm et al, 1991) that claims not dissimilar to those made by staff in this study were substantiated to only a limited extent when what *actually* happened in classrooms was measured by observation. At the same time, questions have to be asked about the extent to which it is practical and appropriate, for example, to learn in groups over an extended period of time. What both of these studies (and our recent work in relation to teaching and learning in the National Certificate - Black, Hall and Martin, 1991) suggest is that there are many teachers who find general encouragement to move towards student-centred learning quite inadequate without further support. The fact that several lecturers explicitly admitted this and that for others there was a misguided assumption that all that was required was to introduce more tutorials suggests to us that staff delivering HN courses are no different. The message for those involved in staff development in this sector must be that it is wrong to assume that an injunction to change teaching styles is sufficient in itself. To introduce *good* interactive groupwork, or to take proper account of the individual needs of students can be demanding and many staff need support in moving in that direction.

5 Conclusions



Scope of the research

We indicated in the Introduction to this report that the overarching aim of the project was to 'evaluate the Advanced Courses Development Programme with regard to its overall effectiveness'. We also identified a number of research questions which the Scottish Office Education Department asked us to address and it is to these which we will now return.

Three important points should be made at this stage. First, it is inevitable that any study such as this takes place at a particular stage in the development programme being considered. This study took place when the first 'Batch 1' courses were being taught for the first time and, indeed, while SCOTVEC was still taking on board some of the lessons from its pilot programme. We have no doubt that many of our findings have implications which continue to apply today. We would, however, stress that we see this report as contributing to the formative development of the new Higher National system rather than being a summative comment on its 'success'. If this has in some cases persuaded us to spend more time highlighting issues which still require consideration rather than offering plaudits for the many successes of this programme then we can only apologise – but such is the role given to the independent external evaluator.

Our second point relates to our data and the ways in which we have used it to answer our research questions. We have no reservations in reminding the reader that much of what we have reported comprised the *opinions* of those we spoke to in our interviews. Whenever it is appropriate we have tried to indicate the extent of these views by reporting the number of persons who held them. But it is important to remember that the strength of this type of data is not in its quantification but in its depth. Even if only one person expresses a particular opinion, it could be important.

Finally, we would alert the reader to the various ways in which we tackled the various research questions. Some questions, such as those on staff views of the strengths and weaknesses of HN Unit specifications, were tackled directly. In other cases, and especially where 'good practice' was involved, we felt it more appropriate to understand what was happening than ask staff what they thought 'good practice' to be. It is in this concluding chapter that we will return to the notion of 'good practice'. But the reader must be aware that what constitutes 'good practice' is often resolution of the problems we have identified. In any case, what constitutes 'good practice', as presented in this chapter, can be no more than our opinion.



The development of unit specifications and course frameworks

The first set of questions asked us to evaluate the processes of *developing* HN Unit specifications used in the Advanced Courses Development Programme. We recognised from the outset that local and national approaches were the two principal models which had been devised to develop units and courses. With that in mind, four questions were posed:-

- 1.1 What are the characteristics of local and national mechanisms for developing HN Units? What criteria are seen as appropriate in deciding which approach to follow?
- 1.2 What are the implications of national and local developments in terms of 'ownership' of the development, costs, ease of use and overall effectiveness?
- 1.3 What are the perceived impacts of these different mechanisms on staff, students and SCOTVEC?
- 1.4 What criteria might therefore be used to describe 'good practice' in the development of HN Units?

Both the case studies and our overall summary of the differences between local and national developments in Chapter 2 suggested that nationally and locally devised unit specifications make quite different demands upon staff in colleges. At first sight it seemed to us that nationally devised unit specifications had much to recommend them. It seemed likely that they would be better written because they had been produced by more experienced unit writers who had SCOTVEC's expertise to draw on and they seemed likely to demand less work from the colleges in terms of background research and liaison with industry and lead bodies.

In fact, our findings did not entirely bear this out. Data from the subject questionnaire study suggested that both nationally and locally devised units were difficult to understand for those who had not been involved in writing them. While it was true that there was less 'basic' work for colleges taking up national unit specifications, there was still substantial effort involved in interpreting the intention behind them. This was not a task of the same magnitude for those who were implementing locally devised unit specifications which they had devised themselves. Nationally devised units probably are easier to implement, but the difference is not necessarily as great as might have been expected.

The main advantage for colleges of local developments seem to lie in the possibilities for innovation which such courses offer. The evidence from this study would support the assertion that local development encourages staff to think much more about the nature and content of their teaching. Staff claimed that local development gave them the opportunity to design units and courses which met perceived local needs; staff involved in the development undoubtedly had a sense of ownership from successful innovation, and, having developed the units themselves, knew clearly

what they were aiming to do. However, the data also suggested that such courses are not easy to develop and demand a substantial commitment of time and resources from the college and the staff concerned. There are dangers that such courses may be less designed to meet a need than to satisfy the interests of staff and that they may fail to achieve recognition as valuable qualifications. Even if these dangers are avoided, there is a possibility that once the course is developed, those teaching it may become over-protective towards it, fail to keep pace with changing circumstances and consequently become less innovative.

Our response to this initial set of questions therefore is somewhat ambivalent. There are strong arguments for and against both local and national development and in our opinion the criteria for 'good practice' depends to a greater extent on strategic considerations than purely educational considerations. If the object of the exercise is to maximise ownership and local appropriateness, and if the resources are available, then the local development of units and courses is the optimum strategy. On the other hand, if the main object is to achieve national comparability at a minimum cost, then the national development of unit specifications and course is probably the appropriate course. The one possible exception to this would be in cases where a course was only offered to a small number of students in a single centre, in which case there is little point in taking the development out of the hands of the centre. We did not have either the resources or the expertise to undertake a full costing exercise of local and national types of development, but have based these comments on the *prima facie* efficiency of having one team developing specifications and frameworks for use in many colleges as against having many teams, scattered throughout Scotland, duplicating one another's efforts.

In reality of course there is no need for a straightforward dichotomy between local and national developments. As the transition to the new system of advanced courses progresses, it may be that there will be an increasing number of courses which make use of both nationally devised and locally devised units. In the first instance, these may be built around a core of national units with local options to meet local needs. If the advantages and disadvantages of each type of development are properly considered, such hybrid courses may even be able to make the best of both worlds.

Perhaps even more advantageous would be the increasing use of consortium arrangements for development. Consortium developments do share in the advantages and disadvantages of both local and national developments and vary substantially in their individual circumstances. Much depends on the size of the consortium and the relationship which exists between colleges. However, in our study we saw examples where colleges have been able to work together to share the effort of development, exchange expertise with one another and produce benefits for all concerned. Experience elsewhere (Black, Hall and Martin 1989 and 1991) leads us to suggest that collaboration between colleges has many advantages for the staff concerned, not least in promoting staff confidence in their own abilities. We can only hope that a climate of increased competition between colleges does not obviate these advantages.



The components of units and courses

In the second set of questions we moved from evaluating the process of development to considering the HN Units and courses themselves. The questions identified focused on unit specifications, on articulation and on the similarities and differences between HN Units and courses and other qualifications.



Unit specifications

We were asked to address two questions which fall under this heading:-

- 2.1 What criteria might be appropriate for evaluating 'good practice' in respect of the specifications of HN Units?
- 2.2 What do staff perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of existing HN Unit specifications?

According to the staff we interviewed, the ideal unit specification should, in their opinion, clearly specify the competences to be assessed, the content, context or knowledge to be covered and the level of attainment required to meet the performance criteria. It should not attempt to cover too much content, should not demand too much assessment and should have an internal coherence or structure amongst the learning outcomes.

The balance of opinion from our questionnaire data was that a slight majority of staff felt that the competences and content, context or knowledge to be covered was reasonably clear. There was a stronger feeling that the level of attainment necessary to meet the performance criteria was not at all clear, and that some guidance on assessment was desired. There were, however, significant differences among subjects in these perceptions. Relatively substantive areas such as engineering, computing and accounting seemed to be judged clearer than, for example, communication. To an extent, this may be taken to reflect on differences in the nature of these subjects, although interview respondents also reported differences in the quality of specifications, depending on when they were written. Overall, there was a perception that the quality of specifications was improving with experience.

There were several suggestions in the data as to how specifications might be improved. One area which caused particular problems for many staff was the basic notion of 'competence'. To an extent it seems likely that this was a function of unfamiliarity, but there were also more pragmatic and fundamental issues at stake. In particular, many respondents had difficulty in knowing how to deal with knowledge within a competence based system. We suspect that clearer guidelines in this area would make it easier to specify the competences covered by outcomes and consequently improve the clarity of specifications overall.

Another practical difficulty concerned the amount of content appropriate to a unit. Some staff complained that units, as they stood, were overcrowded. Since the substantive content of units is the responsibility of college staff, it would seem that several staff were unsure of what to

include in the teaching of the unit and were playing safe and including everything. This naturally leads to problems. Whether this will resolve itself as experience of operating the system is gained is a question which is beyond this research to answer. However, it does suggest that there is a need for clearer guidance to staff about the amount of content expected within units.

The answer to these questions must therefore be that, to an extent, we have 'good practice' at the present time in specifying HN Units, although there is particular need for work in conveying the level of attainment specified by performance criteria to staff. There is, however, an interesting conundrum in staff perceptions as to how this might be achieved. Obviously one way of clarifying the level of attainment would be to exemplify the kind of assessment instrument which might be used to show competence. But while staff were strongly in favour of defining the level of attainment in advance, a majority of respondents to our questionnaire study felt that the assessment instruments themselves should be left as part of the responsibility of the college. Our personal opinion would be that 'good practice' would best be achieved if more advice were given to staff about the appropriate nature of assessment. We recognise, however, that in making this suggestion we may not necessarily have the sympathy of staff opinion.



Articulation

The potential to build constructive articulations amongst Higher National courses and other qualifications was central to the design of the Advanced Courses Development Programme. Accordingly, we were asked to address a number of questions:-

- 2.1 What criteria might be appropriate for evaluating 'good practice' in ... the articulation of (HN Units) with other qualifications and their use in credit transfer arrangements?
- 2.4 What overlap do staff perceive as existing between National Certificate modules, HN Units and undergraduate degrees?
- 2.5 How might linkages between qualifications be best improved.

Our overall finding was that the ability to articulate Higher National courses with degree provision both within a single college and between colleges was seen by respondents as one of the most welcome opportunities offered by the ACDP. Whilst some respondents noted some difficulties in validation and course organisation, sometimes brought about by competing demands from different awarding or accrediting bodies, for most respondents this was seen as a sensible and rational innovation which, at its best, would ensure multiple entry and exit points for students and could well serve to increase access to higher education and training. There was also some evidence that, while some of the pilot courses which had concentrated on articulation with degrees had been constrained by the demands of the already existing degree courses, these constraints would

lessen as degrees themselves were revised. Respondents reported to us continuing development of links between Higher National courses and degrees, both within central institutions and between further education colleges and central institutions, and staff in both types of college saw benefits in this continuing development.

Less was said about articulation between National Certificate programmes and Higher National courses. For most respondents the National Certificate was considered to be a suitable entry qualification provided that suitable modules had been achieved, but there was still a perception of there being a noticeable gap between the demands which the National Certificate made of students and those made by Higher National courses. This was despite the fact that the new Higher National courses were much closer to the National Certificate style of teaching, learning and assessing than the older HNC's and HND's.

Overlap between National Certificate Modules, HN Units and undergraduate degrees was not seen as problematic in terms of content or structure. The constraints upon the flexibility of multiple entry and exit points caused by the competing demands of different accrediting bodies may well be alleviated in time, since there is evidence that SCOTVEC is aware of these problems and in some cases has negotiated agreements to circumvent them. Overall, however, these data suggest that the linkages between qualifications, which exist at the present time, have substantial merit and that there already exists in the system as it stands much which could be considered 'good practice'.



Comparisons with other courses

A third set of questions about the units themselves focused on the similarities and differences with other courses:

- 2.3 What similarities and differences do staff feel there to be in the treatment of general competences and approach to teaching between HN Units, National Certificate Modules and undergraduate degrees?

The comparisons most frequently made, both explicitly and implicitly, were between HN Units and National Certificate modules.

Overall, the evidence would seem to be that the ACDP had successfully bridged the gap between National Certificate and Higher National courses. The general trend in teaching approaches, away from formal lecturing and towards student-centred learning, was comparable with similar moves which had taken place in National Certificate teaching in recent years. The approaches to assessment in the two systems were seen as similar and the benefits which accrued, such as assessing all outcomes and not merely focusing on a small sample of student learning for a summative examination, were seen as comparable.

Also comparable, however, was a view among some staff that the competence model of assessment in both systems had negative effects on

standards. We have no evidence to either confirm or refute this view. Students were seen as needing to put less effort into their work because of the ready availability of reassessments; assessment was somehow 'easier' because it focused on smaller units of learning; and competence was defined in terms of 'minimum competence' which did not encourage students to go beyond this. That this latter perception persisted was surprising to us because one of the major differences between the National Certificate approach and the ACDP model is that in the latter staff have the opportunity to recognise 'merit' performance which is not available to them in the National Certificate approach.

Links with under-graduate degrees were not discussed as frequently or in such depth. Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out, the potential for articulation between Higher National courses and under-graduate degree courses was seen as one of the strengths of the ACDP approach. In the few cases where we looked in detail at this linkage it was obvious that a two-way process of influence was at work. The content of under-graduate degree courses had a down-wash effect on what was seen as possible in HN Units but at the same time the competence model, and the unitised structure, on which HN Units are based, were clearly beginning to have an effect on the structure of degrees. It will take some time for these influences to manifest themselves in detail but the early findings from this research suggest that the linkages, both upwards and downwards, from Higher National courses are tending to be positive and proving to be productive.



In conclusion

A final question posed at the beginning of the research project offers us the opportunity to make a number of concluding observations on our findings:

- 2.6 How might the Advanced Courses Development Programme best lead to rational and efficient provision across the further and higher education sector, avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort?

Up to this point we would conclude that while there are features of the system which could be improved, the fundamental model which has been used as a design for the new advanced courses seems to be sound. However, when we turn to consider this final question and reflect not so much on the substance of the development programme as its management, we feel that there are lessons which could be learned from this experience which would be worthy of note in future similar developments.

Although it is difficult to quantify, we were convinced from our interviews that, while the majority of staff responded quite positively to the principle of developing new courses, there was an underlying feeling of frustration that their experience could have been more satisfying. Much of this frustration was directed, not always fairly, against SCOTVEC as the body which had the most visible responsibility for the ACDP.

An example of this was the frequent complaint that guidelines,

recommendations and regulations often changed while staff were in the middle of developing their courses thus rendering some of their work ineffective. A number of staff told us how they had produced drafts of units or course frameworks only to find that SCOTVEC had 'moved the goalposts' and they had to go back and think again.

The immediate answer to these complaints is that ACDP was designed from the outset as a rolling programme with pilot phases built in and that the purpose of running pilot courses is to learn from them. Those who were involved in pilot courses should, therefore, have expected this to happen and should not have expected the guidelines, which applied to one course at one phase of the development, to apply to another course at a later stage.

However, it must be admitted that the progression from Phase 1 to Phase 2 pilots, and from there to Batch 1 implementation, was extremely rapid and may not have allowed all the lessons from one phase to be learnt before the following phase was introduced. The fact that SCOTVEC hastened the introduction of Batch 1 courses after consulting with colleges, and because of an expressed desire on the part of the colleges to move rapidly to full implementation was neither mentioned by, nor apparent to, any of our respondents. This appears to indicate a failure of communication somewhere within the system which led staff, in the absence of a clear indication of what was happening and why it should be happening, to blame SCOTVEC.

Such apparent confusion may simply be the result of trying to push ahead too quickly on too many fronts at once. Certainly, in order to avoid the appearance of constantly moving the goalposts, SCOTVEC would have had to introduce the new Higher National courses over a much longer period of time, perhaps allowing each pilot phase to run for two or more years before the introduction of the next step. We do not know if such a delay would have been acceptable to the college staff who have ultimate responsibility for delivering the courses. The impression we have from these data is that there was a sense of confusion in the colleges and this in some cases led to a feeling of alienation.

In some cases, this confusion was compounded by a feeling among staff that they had been given inadequate support. In fact, the balance of evidence would suggest that SCOTVEC did try to support this programme systematically but the message that they had done this failed to get through to many staff who were implementing the programme.

In practice, support for staff can take many forms. What is clear from the comments which staff made to us, however, is that they tended only to think of the more visible and direct forms of support and left out consideration of many concurrent activities which could be thought of as 'supporting' the ACDP. Thus it was that staff tended not to think of SCOTVEC's development of National Unit specifications, course frameworks and guidelines or their production of staff training materials as aspects of 'support' for the programme.

Similarly, if a member of staff attended a SCOTVEC seminar or

workshop and returned to the college to further disseminate what he or she had learned, there was no evidence that this was ascribed to 'support' from SCOTVEC. The cascade approach to dissemination appeared relatively invisible to college staff and left them feeling that they had not received authoritative guidance but had been left to do it themselves.

All of this leads us to suggest that an important consideration in any development of this kind, which relies on a great deal of work being done by the staff in colleges, is the establishment of good communication with 'ground level' staff in as direct a way as possible. The filtering of information through college senior managements, staff development officers, and cascade models of dissemination, whilst relatively economic, would seem to be an ineffective way of winning the hearts and minds of those who bear the ultimate responsibility for delivery – the classroom teachers.

We were also conscious that many staff, in criticising the level of support, tended only to think in terms of that which might have been expected to come from SCOTVEC. The extent of support, or the lack of it, from local authorities and colleges, received little mention. It would seem to us that considerable benefit would be gained in future such exercises if formal negotiations were to take place amongst the various bodies which might be responsible for supporting an innovation and that staff at all levels were aware of the support which was available and who was providing it.

The messages which staff receive, and the perceptions which they consequently develop, can have important consequences. It is striking that one of the persistent problems with the ACDP would seem to be that, despite the effort involved in developing clear specifications, many staff are not convinced that national standards exist for given units and courses and they ascribe this largely to defects in the system implemented by SCOTVEC. Our data are insufficient to confirm or deny the veracity of staff opinion in this area, but our hypothesis would certainly be that staff are more likely to be confident of the existence of national standards if they feel they have the support of an authoritative and consistent body at the centre. The evidence would seem to be that staff feel that the quality of specifications is improving and no doubt now that SCOTVEC has had the experience of the development programme it is better placed to offer authoritative advice in areas in which there was initially some uncertainty.

It may be that now is the time for SCOTVEC to draw together all the lessons which have been learned and issue sets of guidelines of the type which they published to accompany the National Certificate.

As well as clear guidance about what is required of them, we have evidence from previous research (Black, Hall and Martin, 1989) that staff also benefit greatly from opportunities for collaboration and discussion with colleagues in their own, and other, institutions. Such contact with their peers not only promotes staff confidence in their own abilities, but also appears to have beneficial effects on many aspects of teaching, learning and assessment.

The dangers of moving too quickly must be obvious. Equally there are dangers in undue delay. At a time when the further and higher education sectors are in a state of rapid development it is important that all those involved in innovations of this kind should learn as many lessons as possible from their colleagues' experience. New industry-led standards, which will be accredited as Scottish Vocational Qualifications, are emerging in many areas and will have implications for Higher National courses. Our experience from this project would suggest that colleges and SCOTVEC would be well advised to have clear guidelines from the outset on how courses should be designed and where staff might obtain support in implementing them.

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